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RITA



COVENTRY

JULIAN STREET



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RITA COVENTRY

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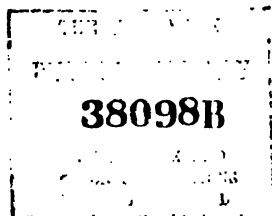
RITA COVENTRY

BY
JULIAN STREET



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1922
R.B.P.



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RITA COVENTRY



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CHAPTER I

AMONG New Yorkers it is recognized that the changing seasons do not first announce themselves from almanacs, nor in precocious items upon menus, nor yet among the growing things of Riverside Drive and Central Park. The first signs make themselves apparent on the treeless, grassless reaches of that hard-paved highway extending from the Waldorf to the Plaza. And to-day, though it was but mid-February according to the calendar, the dense and animated crowds upon Fifth Avenue, the brightening costumes worn by women and exhibited in windows, and a bursting golden something in the air proclaimed the spring.

To Richard Parrish the miracle was the more wonderful because he had not seen it come to pass. It had been revealed to him, a thing accomplished, on his return this morning from a brief trip to Chicago. Only a week ago he had left New York plunged in its miserable winter: slush swimming in the streets and a solution of slush swimming in the heavy atmosphere above them, mixed with the gaseous breath of coughing motor cars. Chicago had been as bad or

worse. The weather there, coupled with what Parrish persisted in regarding as a provincial taxi service, had forced him to the purchase of a pair of rubbers—things abominable alike to his bachelor fastidiousness and to his feeling, as a youngish and active man, that rubbers properly belonged to the equipment of decrepitude.

A wet snow had been falling yesterday in Chicago. He had worn the rubbers to the train, but once in his Pullman had quickly slipped them off, and in expression of their permanent dismissal from his life had pushed them far into the recess under the opposite seat. And though this renunciation implied in him nothing of the ground-hog's gift of prophecy, the weather in New York this morning had seemed to give benignant sanction to the act.

It was a day for open windows. The windows of his limousine had been open as he drove home from the station, yet he had felt the weight of his winter overcoat uncomfortably. Entering his apartment he found the windows open there, for Ito, his servant, had seen to that. The curtains swayed gently in a soft breeze; a pattern of dappled sunshine, sifting through them, wavered over the fixed pattern of the library rug, and from the streets, ten floors below, floated up to him a medley of sounds blending into a not altogether inharmonious symphony.

He had not telephoned to Alice until after bathing and looking through his accumulated mail; nor did the thought strike him that in the period of their

close comradeship this was the first time the telephoning, on his return after an absence from New York, had been thus postponed. That, however, was the fact. In the course of the past year he had made four of these short business trips. After the first two he had telephoned her from the station. Last time he had come home before telephoning. This time he had not telephoned until he was ready to start down to his office.


Then he had departed for Wall Street, wearing for the first time this year a light overcoat and a soft gray hat, and carrying a wanghee cane. The day in the Street had been one of mere routine; the market was dull; at the close he had come uptown on a leisurely Elevated train in preference to the swifter Subway, and descending at Thirty-third Street had walked to his apartment by way of Fifth Avenue. Then and then only had he felt entirely at home again, for it is not until he has walked Fifth Avenue that the returned New Yorker feels certain of his reinstatement.

Now, seated in his library, with the late sun shining through the west windows like a rose-coloured calcium in the theatre, his thoughts were on the Avenue and what had happened there. Not only had he seen the spring emphatically confirmed, but his walk was illumined by a circumstance the adventurous flavour of which seemed to him exquisitely suited to the season, and left him filled with a strange restlessness.

The restlessness was more than merely vernal. There was contrition in it; and because the contrition had to do with Alice Meldrum, Parrish felt now, as the time when he must go to her drew near, an obscure sense of annoyance with her. When a man is about to wound the feelings of a tender-hearted and adoring woman he is likely to feel a little bit annoyed with her.

In a sense, he reflected, Alice would have no right to feel hurt. He had made no definite engagement with her for this evening. Yesterday, before departing from Chicago, he had wired her that he was starting. This morning he had telephoned that he was back and would be in to see her late in the afternoon. Specifically, that was all. But the trouble was that at the time of telephoning he had planned to take her out to dinner, and had known that she would understand it so. There lay his difficulty. So many things were understood between them in that way.

Of course it was not his fault that his plans were changed. When he telephoned to Alice how could he have foreseen that in the glory of the afternoon he would meet Larry Merrick proudly escorting the gorgeous Rita Coventry, or that Larry would stop and present him—for the purpose, Parrish suspected, of exhibiting his privilege of addressing the singer by her first name. By a happy chance the meeting had occurred in front of Yamanaka's, which led to the discovery that Rita and he had a kindred interest in Japanese prints. But even so, who could have



anticipated that on what was evidently a half-mischievous impulse, the prima donna would invite him to a dinner party at her house that night?

Of course he had accepted. Really there had been nothing to prevent his doing so, and an opportunity to know Rita Coventry did not present itself every day. Besides, there were her prints—she had promised to show him some Hokusais, Utamaros, and Toyokunis. Even Alice, in whom he had inculcated a certain interest in Japanese prints, was aware that he was particularly fond of the works of those artists. Surely, under the circumstances, she could spare him:

For more than ten years he had admired Coventry, knowing her only through the press, through gossip, through her voice, and through his opera glasses. At the time of her sensational début in Paris he had heard her sing "Circe" at the Opéra Comique, and one day in the same season had seen her lunching at Larue's. She had eaten heartily, laughed heartily, gestured with her hands, arms, and shoulders. That was as near as he had ever been to her until this afternoon. The elderly man who had sat across from her at the table was manifestly not the king with whom her name was linked by gossip. It was her father, so his waiter had informed him. The story was that her father had been a postman in Rochester, New York.

Two or three years later, after she had captured London, Parrish heard her there in "Tosca," "La Bohème" and "Madame Butterfly," and since she had left Covent Garden and become the adored of

New York operagoers he had heard her in many parts. Season after season he had listened and observed without detecting any change in her save that her figure, displayed in certain of her rôles with such striking generosity, had with the passing years become if possible more perfect.

She had been dressed this afternoon as one felt a beautiful opera singer ought to dress. Her costume was utterly unlike that of other fashionable women; she was, so to say, elegantly noticeable. The gown of gray cloth with black braid in unexpected places, and a skirt rather short, somehow looked Russian, though perhaps that suggestion was rather the effect of her dark and lustrous furs; her rather small black hat had a hedge of black feathers depending from the brim in such a way as partially to conceal the eyes—but only partially. Glimpsing them through the fringe of feathers as through heavy lace, he had been conscious of an impulse to bend over and look directly at them. But that had not been necessary, for presently she had thrown back her head and let him see her eyes. That was when she invited him to dinner. It had seemed to him that an agreeable vibration was set going between them when their eyes met, and he even fancied he detected a little note of challenge in her look as she gave the invitation—something dashing, like the gesture of a cavalier flinging a gauntlet.

This pleasant and stimulating picture in his mind was dispersed abruptly by the striking of the grand-

father's clock. Five. His car would be waiting, and by going at once to Alice's he could spend two hours with her before coming home to dress for dinner. That would not satisfy her, but it ought to help a little.

Descending in the elevator he began to think of the explanation he would make. She would not reproach him—there was nothing of that in their relationship—but she would feel hurt, and though pride would make her try to conceal her feelings, she was too artless to be able to conceal them—especially from him. How he knew her! And all in less than two years.

Of course she was sensitive. Very likely she was becoming more so. That was not unnatural. To a man an attachment such as theirs, running along as theirs had run along, pleasantly but without a definite objective, was an agreeable thing. It gave him a deep interest without too much responsibility. But to a woman, however much she might at first endeavour to deceive herself into a belief in equality between the sexes, such a relationship could not bring permanent contentment. In the beginning he had tried to point that out to her; but she had shown a headlong strain, very strange, he thought, in one of her temperament, and had professed herself satisfied with things as they were. Thenceonward they had drifted.

He had tried always to be considerate. Had he not, for example, written her twice from Chicago

during the past week, busy though he had been? Little attentions of that kind pleased her so. When at home he telephoned her every morning. Often he sent her flowers. For her birthday last year he had given her a handsome lamp, and at Christmas a Chinese rug for the living room of her apartment. She had been twenty-six when he first met her, and in May she would be twenty-eight. Already he had looked at flexible linked bracelets of platinum, set with square diamonds, chic and costly—and with stocks gone absolutely to the devil, too!

“Park Avenue,” he said to his chauffeur as he got into his car.

Then, suddenly, for the first time, his mind focused sharply on the fact that somehow it had come to be understood between his chauffeur and himself that Park Avenue meant Alice’s address. Habit! He had become a habit with Alice and she a habit with him. It was habit that made her expect to dine with him to-night. When he had been away he always took her out to dinner on the night of his return. Moreover, they dined together three or four times a week, now at a restaurant, now at her apartment, occasionally at his. On Thursdays and Sundays he almost always took her to a restaurant, because her maid was out on those evenings—and this was Thursday.

Their habits were so fixed that others understood them; the elevator men in the building in which she lived, for instance. Parrish knew them as well as

he knew those in his own building. He even tipped them. They never announced him by telephone but took him right up to Alice's floor; nor had he to mention the number of the floor; all that was understood. Also, it was understood that one long and two short pressures on the doorbell button was his ring. Alice's maid, Otilia, did not answer the doorbell when she heard that ring, for it was understood that Alice herself liked to let him in. Parrish thought well of Otilia, though he sometimes found himself wishing she would treat him more as a caller and less as a member of the household.

As his car stopped before the tall apartment building where Alice lived, Parrish was aware of a feeling of rebellion against all this mass of understanding.

"You've been away, sir," said big Henry, the doorman.

"Yes, yes," Parrish replied, and hastened across the sidewalk.

"Back again, Mr. Parrish?" said Michael, the elevator man. And as the car ascended, "Unusually fine weather we're having for this time of year."

"Yes, fine."

Parrish was wishing that he knew some other tenant of the building in order that he might astonish Michael by getting off at any floor other than the seventh—the same old seventh.

At Alice's door he allowed his feeling of perversity to triumph. He pressed the button only once. But even so it was Alice, not Otilia, who answered.

CHAPTER II

SHE was tall, deep bosomed, golden haired, with a delicate skin which, when she flushed, as she did now on seeing him, made him think of an evening gown she sometimes wore—a gown in which a glow of cerise showed faintly through a sheer, fine drapery of creamy satin.

“Dick!”

“Hello, Alice.” He entered the little hall.

“Why, you rang only once!”

Then, after a moment, as he drew away from her and slipped out of his overcoat Otillia appeared.

“Oh, it’s Mr. Parrish!” she exclaimed, surprised and a little confused.

“You didn’t recognize my ring, eh?” He was smiling.

“No, sir.” She turned back toward the kitchen.

“There’s one thing Otillia doesn’t understand, at any rate,” he thought to himself with a certain satisfaction.

After taking his coat and hat and hanging them in a closet Alice linked arms with him and led him to the living room.

“Why didn’t you ring the way you always do?” she asked. “I thought it must be you, but I——”

"Because it's spring," he answered.

"What has that to do with it?"

"Life starts anew in the spring. Everything is new, even the way I ring your bell."

"Silly!" She patted his cheek. He sat down in an upholstered chair—"his" chair—and she perched upon the arm. "Did you think of me while you were away?" she asked.

"Didn't I write you twice? Didn't I wire?"

"Yes, you were a good boy." She stroked back a lock of his hair. "But did you think of me often?"

"Of course, of course." Then as though to dismiss the topic he asked, "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I'm still looking for something to do in my spare time," she said.

"You haven't found anything?" It was as much a statement as a question.

"Nothing I liked. You don't take much stock in my job hunting, do you, Dick?"

"If you needed a job you'd get one."

"Yes. But as money isn't particularly a consideration, don't you think I ought to wait for something I'd like?"

"I think you'd be happier with something to do."

"Just anything?"

"Perhaps not, but——"

"Because," she went on, "I did have a job one day. Clara and I went around and acted in a movie."

"You did? What put that in your head?"

"Clara knew a girl who did it. We thought it wouldn't hurt to try it. They used us in crowd scenes. It was rather fun, just for once; but the lights are hard on your eyes, and they keep you waiting around doing nothing for hours at a time, and some of the people are terribly queer. I shouldn't like the movies."

"I understood when I went away that you were thinking of taking up dress designing."

"I asked Madame Kay about it. She says the field is overcrowded. Anyway, I don't believe I sketch well enough."

"Have you thought of anything else?"

"Yes. I'd like to work with children. It's the one thing I imagine I have a little gift for. I went around to a crèche and inquired, but they only needed an office worker; they didn't need any help with the children."

"I wonder if you'll ever find anything you do care for," he said, shaking his head as though he did not believe she would.

"I care for you."

"I know; but caring for someone isn't enough to fill a person's life—that's just the point."

"Not a man's, perhaps," she answered.

He saw his opportunity.

"But, my dear girl, it's not good for you to have no outside interest. It's not fair to yourself. We can't be together every evening, even when I am in

New York. Take this evening, for instance. When I telephoned this morning I was expecting to take you out to dinner, but as things have turned out I shan't be able to."

Her eyes, which had been on him, turned to the rug.

"I'm sorry," she said, drooping.

"So am I. But it can't be helped. I have to dine with some friends of Larry Merrick's. I didn't know until this afternoon. It's a dinner party. If I didn't go it would throw things all out of joint. They have some fine Japanese prints they've been wanting me to see."

"I suppose you couldn't see them any other time?" Still she was looking wistfully down.

"Not very well. They're going away."

"Maybe you'll be able to come in later in the evening."

"I'm afraid not. I'm invited for eight; that means we won't be at table until eight-thirty or so. And afterwards there'll be the prints to see. I don't expect to get away much before midnight. For heaven's sake, Alice, don't look like that! You make me feel like a brute."

"I'm sorry. You're anything but a brute. I couldn't help being disappointed."

"But I ought to be able to go out to dinner and look at some prints without your making a tragedy of it." There was a slight note of irritation in his tone.

"I know it. It was just for a minute. You've

been away, and I was expecting—— But I'm all over it now." She smiled as though to offer proof. "It was selfish of me, and you're never selfish with me. I want you to go to-night and have a fine time."

"That's a dear girl," he approved. Then he added, "But don't say I'm unselfish."

"But you are. You've always done everything I wanted."

"Not always."

"Yes, you have."

"What about Blenkinswood?" he reminded her. Somehow it salved his conscience to remind her of what he had refused her in the past.

"That's different," she said. "You had your point of view about it and I had mine, but it was for you to decide."

Becoming interested in the topic itself he forgot his reason for having brought it up.

"Well," said he, "now that you look back, don't you see that I was right?"

"I see that it was for you to decide," she repeated, evading a direct answer.

"Yes; but be honest with yourself—wasn't I right?"

"I've never been able to see," she said after a moment's hesitation, "why you couldn't have taken me to Blenkinswood if you'd really wanted to."

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "I thought you had stopped talking about it because you'd come around to my point of view."

"No," she answered, "I stopped because I saw it was annoying you to hear what I thought. It's your place. If you want to forget about it——"

"And I *do*," he put in with a rueful little chuckle.

He did want to forget about Blenkinswood. That old house in Virginia weighed upon his conscience like a neglected poor relation. With its mortgaged acres it had come to him as an inheritance—a tumble-down ancestral home, symbolizing the decay of the proud colonial family whose name his mother as a maiden had been the last to bear. He had paid off the mortgage, spent some money in putting the place in better condition, brought to New York the portraits, the mahogany, and such old silverware as the Yankee soldiers had not found, and installed a farmer to run the plantation on shares.

The farm had never paid. For a dozen years he had sent annually a check to cover repairs and replenishments, yet each year there was a deficit. In all that time he had gone down there but once, and the excursion had proved depressing—a drive of eleven miles through a sea of mud called by courtesy a road, and at the end the spectacle of a house falling to pieces, surrounded by broken fences, neglected box trees, and undernourished cattle grazing amongst weeds where gardens used to bloom.

Year after year he told himself that something must be done about Blenkinswood, but the mental whisper grew fainter and fainter with time. He knew that the farmer and his family were a shiftless


if not dishonest lot who ought to be turned out; yet the thought of going there again, of seeing the cheap oak furniture in the old panelled drawing room and the horrid little ornaments on the porphyry mantelpiece which Lafayette had sent from France as a gift to that several-times-great-grandfather of his who had built Blenkinswood, of smelling cabbage cooking, and hearing the man's maundering excuses for the years of failure was so unpleasant that he continued to postpone the duty.

Alice had become interested in Blenkinswood soon after becoming interested in him. She had developed what he regarded as a mania about the place, and for a time had spoken to him of what he ought to do about it in a voice which was like the insistent voice of conscience.

"You ought to take care of it," she would say. "You ought to be proud of it. Not everybody has an ancestral home. Not everybody comes from an aristocratic old family. You don't appreciate what it means. Take me, for instance. My father built the house where I was born, in Cleveland. My grandfather came out there from Connecticut when he was a young man. His father was just a plain farmer."

"That's all the Blenkins were," he would reply. "Planters and farmers are the same thing."

Then he would tell her lightly that ancestry was largely a question of bookkeeping; that everyone had the same number of grandfathers; and that



whereas his aristocratic forbears had handed down to him a plantation covered with weeds and mortgages, her father, who had been a manufacturer, had left her and her sister well provided for. And he would tell her tales of his ancestors; stories of bouts of drinking over cards, duels and scandals.

"They raised tobacco and slaves and Democrats and hell," he would say. "Down in that part of the country they still think and talk so much about family that they have no time left to weed the garden. They're lovable people, but I thank the Lord I had sense enough to get out and come to New York when I was a youngster. I'm prouder of my seat on the Exchange than I would be of twenty Blenkinswoods."

At first Alice had urged him only to put Blenkinswood in repair and get a capable farmer to run it, but presently she began to want to see the old plantation herself. This also had become a fixed idea with her; nor had he been able to shake it with his descriptions of the wretched roads and the dilapidation.

"Isn't it natural that I should be interested in your family?" she would demand. "I'll never get over wanting to see the place where they lived."

That, in effect, was her declaration now, uttered with a curious gentle tenacity.

"But, you *have* seen all of it that's worth seeing," he told her. "You've seen the best of the portraits and furniture from Blenkinswood in my apartment. You'd be awfully disappointed in the place itself."

She shook her head.

"And I've told you a dozen times why I can't take you there. It would make talk."

"It wouldn't if I were your sister or your cousin."

"But you aren't."

"Who'd know that?"

His laugh was impatient.

"The whole country would know it inside of six hours. If a man comes from Virginia the people down there know more about his family than he knows himself. If I were to take you it would make a scandal."

"It would be my risk, wouldn't it?"

He gazed at her, amazed.

"Upon my word," he said, "you fairly paralyze me when you say a thing like that! It's so unlike you."

"If a woman has a clear conscience——"

He interrupted.

"In this world a clear conscience isn't sufficient. You've got to think how things look."

"Well, at the worst, how would they look? They'd look as if I loved you. Don't I? I'm proud of loving you! I'm proud of the kind of love it is. I have nothing to conceal. Don't you suppose a good many people who know us are able to see that I love you? Clara knows. I've told her."

"What did you do that for?"

"She's the best girl friend I have in New York," Alice answered. "She knew it anyhow, and I wanted her to see how it was."

"What did she say?"

"That I was heading for unhappiness."

"Well," he said defensively, "I never tried to conceal that possibility, did I?"

"That's what I told her. I wanted her to see the beauty of an absolutely honest friendship like ours. I've never been so happy in my life. You know that. It's worth any risk. I wanted her to see how fine it was—my never demanding anything of you; wanting only as much as you are glad to give; our complete independence; your having promised to tell me frankly if you ever found yourself losing interest in me."

"What did Clara say to all that?"

"She said you might promise, but that you wouldn't tell me when it came to the point."

"Why did she think I wouldn't?" he asked, surprised.

"She says men don't do things that way. Poor Clara! It's not unnatural that she should be cynical about men after her experience."

"Just what was her experience, do you know?"

"Her husband was an absolute good-for-nothing."

"But how do you know?"

"She's told me all about it."

"Oh." He smiled faintly.

"That's another reason I wanted to tell her about you. She has her life to make over again, and it's not good for her to be so cynical. She mustn't go so much by that one bitter experience, judging all

men by one. She must learn that some men aren't that way."

He gave a grim little chuckle.

"I guess you didn't make much headway with her, holding me up as an example."

"What makes you think that?"

"Clara doesn't approve of me."

"I don't see why you say that."

"It's all right," he said. "I'm not complaining."

This difference over Clara was an old though not a hard-fought difference between them. He did not care to fight it hard, first because Clara was a woman, and second because so long as he was not obliged to see much of her, he had no great objections to Alice's friendship with her.

It was a friendship antedating his own friendship with Alice. The two girls, who were of about the same age, had met during the war in a Cleveland hospital where they were in training as nurses' aids. Before they had completed their courses the war had come to an end. All this Parrish knew by hearsay. As for him, the close of the war had found him doing relief work in Poland, and it was not until some months after his return that he met Alice, who was paying a visit in New York.

He had first seen her at a Sunday-evening party given by some people neither of them knew well—one of those large, vague parties the object of which seems to be to assemble and feed flocks of people who have never met before, and who, having eaten and

participated in the vocal din, depart upon their various ways through the city, never perhaps to meet again.

Sometimes, however, they do meet again. Parrish had asked to be presented to Alice, had driven her home after the party, and before leaving her at her door had arranged to have her as his guest for dinner and the theatre a few nights later. Though her beauty had been the first thing to attract him he had found himself charmed, as they fell into talk, by her genuineness. Moreover, there was something fascinating about the expression of her mouth. At first you kept thinking she was just about to smile, but you presently discovered that this illusion resulted from the sweet aspect of her mouth in repose.

In the next few weeks he had seen her often. The time came when according to her original plan she should return to Cleveland, where she lived with her married sister; but she did not go. By that time he had not wanted her to go and, albeit with a certain air of playful camaraderie, had told her so. An orphan, financially independent, she was able to do as she pleased, and now it pleased her most to do as he pleased. She put off her departure first from day to day, then from week to week, moving from the house where she had visited to a hotel and later to this pleasant little apartment, which she had rented furnished for a few months.

Before those months were ended a frankly affectionate relationship had been established between

them. When her first short lease on the apartment was expiring she renewed it, this time for a year, and now another year was half gone.

It was shortly after Alice had first taken the apartment that Clara put in an appearance in New York. She came at once to Alice's with the understanding that she was to remain there for a few days while seeking a boarding place. The apartment had but two bedrooms, one of which was occupied by Otilia, and with these facts to work from Parrish had no difficulty in deducing that from the time of Clara's advent the living-room couch must needs be pressed into service as a bed.

Because of Alice's enthusiasm for her friend he had been disposed at first to like her and had tried during the first week of her stay to make things pleasant for her, but when she had been there two weeks, showing no sign of preparation to leave, he began to wonder just how long it ought to take to find a boarding place, and just how long a comfort-loving girl like Clara would be content to spend her nights upon a couch. Then he had discovered through a chance remark dropped by Clara herself that it was not she, but Alice, who was sleeping on the couch, which meant of course that Clara was in possession of the bedroom and the bed. It was then that he first began to notice in Clara's pink prettiness, particularly about the nose and eyes, the hint of an expression slightly porcine.

Thenceforward, when he took Alice out, he had

ceased to include her visitor, but of course Alice sometimes felt she should not go, and urged him to come, instead, to her apartment. However, Clara's friends were generally to be found there in the evenings—a heterogeneous collection ranging from sleek youths intent on taking the two girls out to jazz restaurants where they could dance, to Sam Burke (a broker of a type Parrish did not approve), and his effulgent, jewel-incrusted, paradise-plume-sprouting wife.

After a few evenings with Clara's friends, Parrish had begun to stay away from the apartment, a fact that seemed to disturb Alice far more than it had disturbed her to sleep upon the couch, and thereafter the situation did not long endure. Precisely how it came to be terminated he was never certain. He only knew that after the third week of her visit, Clara had moved to a boarding house round the corner.

There she had ever since resided, and though she continued to be with Alice a great deal, lunching with her either at home or at a restaurant several times a week, spending many of her daytime hours at the apartment, and even coming there to do her dressmaking, she now avoided, as though by tacit understanding, the hours at which he was likely to come in.

Clara's chief source of revenue, he had been given to understand, was a small alimony, though something was said also of her writing a weekly New York

fashion letter to several Middle Western newspapers. It was to these fashion letters that Clara referred when, as often happened, she spoke of "my work." He had been curious to know what sort of writing she could do, and had several times asked Alice to get him copies of some of her friend's journalistic efforts; but these had never been produced. Alice herself had never been permitted to see them, she told him.

"Dick," said Alice presently, "Clara is wrong about that, isn't she? You would tell me, wouldn't you, if you found yourself losing interest in me? You promised, remember."

Why, he wondered, were her thoughts running on that theme to-day?

"Did I ever break a promise to you?"

"No; but——"

"Well, then, what's the use in discussing such a thing?"

"You understand I wouldn't blame you if you did lose interest. We can't control those things. They just happen. All I ask is to be told. It would be so humiliating to feel that you were——"

"What on earth is all this about?" he demanded impatiently.

"Nothing. But men do tire of women—we all know that. You tired of Josephine. You told me so yourself."

"Josephine!" he exclaimed almost angrily, plac-



ing one hand on the arm of the chair as if about to rise. "What has Josephine got to do with it?"

"You were tremendously interested in her at first; but in three years you——"

This time he did rise.

"Look here!" he said. "I wish you'd kindly drop that subject. Josephine wasn't—— Well, I prefer not to talk about it."

"All right, dear, so long as you understand that you're absolutely free. There are no strings to you. You know that, don't you, Dick?"

She spoke with intensity, gazing into his face, and this eager gravity of hers surprised him. It always surprised him. He had a theory that blondes were not intense.

"Free?" he repeated. "Why, of course! We're both free. That's understood."

He tried to make his tone convincing and if he failed she did not appear to notice it. It was their established creed, and no one notices the tone in which an established creed is pattered off; yet now he was scrutinizing this creed. How free was he? At the moment he felt painfully like a husband, for had he been actually her husband his sense of responsibility to her could not have been much greater. She depended upon him so.

Strange how that sense of responsibility had grown upon him almost unnoticed. It was the very thing he had intended to avoid. From the time when he and Alice had begun to be a great deal with each

other he had been careful to make clear to her his attitude toward life. He had told her definitely, although in a manner meant to suggest casualness, that he intended always to remain a bachelor, and so, possessed of this knowledge, she was in position to order matters as she might see fit.

But he had not stopped with that. Now and then, after their relationship had become affectionate, he had harked back to the topic, pointing out to her, with an air of impersonality which in the circumstances he considered somewhat creditable, that she was young and beautiful, with domestic tastes including a great love for children, and that she ought to marry and have a home and family of her own; and he had even intimated that, delightful though the relationship was to him, he thought it unfair to her, since it could lead to nothing, and since other men, knowing of her interest in him, or sensing it, would drift away.

"What do I care!" she said.

Since then his prophecy had been fulfilled. Other men she had known had drifted away; they did not come here now. Once, more recently, he had spoken of that, finding his opportunity in the disappearance from her living room of all masculine photographs.

"What's the use of keeping their pictures around?" she had returned with a little laugh. "They'll never know the difference."

"You don't see any of them any more?"

"No—thank goodness!" Then as though by way

of explanation she had come and kissed him, saying, "I love you."

Poor Alice! She did love him. He had ample proof of that. Now he found himself wishing that she did not love him quite so much. It was less his love for her than hers for him that bound him to her.

"What are you going to do with yourself this evening?" he asked when, at seven, he got up to go.

"I think I'll telephone to Clara and see if she can't come over. We might go to a movie or something." She followed him toward the hall door. "Have a good time, dear, won't you, and forgive me for having been silly?"

"Nonsense. There's nothing to forgive."

"Yes," she insisted, "I can't always hide my feelings as I ought to. It's because I love you so."

"You're a dear girl."

"Are you going to think of me after you go?"

"Of course I am."

And it was true. He did think of her. He thought of her as he descended in the elevator, and as he drove home, and as he dressed, and as he went to Rita Coventry's. He thought how good she was, how unselfish, how honest, how devoted, and the thought of her merits weighed upon him. If only she were not so fine and so devoted things might be easier just now!

Women! A good woman is such a lovely, deli-

cate, lofty-minded thing; but when she falls in love, she falls headlong, and doesn't count costs. With a man it is different. He may be in love, but even so he can't think constantly of love and nothing else. He has other interests—and he does like variety. No matter how sincerely he may care for a woman, he doesn't want her draped lovingly around his neck *all* the time. That sort of devotion wears a man out. That is the trouble with women. Once in love they can think of nothing else. They have no outside interests. Love is their whole life.

Thus he thought as his car carried him toward Rita Coventry's house.

CHAPTER III

HAVING closed the door behind Dick, Alice stood there with her hand upon the knob until she heard the elevator come up to the hall outside and descend again. It was as if she had half expected him to return for something.

With the departure of the elevator she turned back to the living room, crossed to the desk on which reposed the telephone, and called up Clara Proctor.

"Have you started dinner yet?" she asked her friend.

"No, I was just going in."

"Come on over here instead. It's Otilia's night out, but we can pick up something for ourselves."

"I thought you were going out?" Clara put in quickly.

"I had expected to, but Dick has to go somewhere."

"All right, dear, I'll be around in a few minutes."

Alice, wearing a checked gingham apron, let her friend in when she arrived.

"I have soup on," she explained, and hastened back toward the kitchen.

In leisurely fashion Clara removed her coat and hat, and passing into the living room paused before

a mirror, giving a touch to her blonde hair; then crossing to the table she took up a fashion magazine and stood for a time looking at it. Noises coming through the open pantry door presently reminded her that supper was being made ready. Without putting down the magazine she moved to the dining-room door, where she stopped and called to Alice.

"Anything I can do, dear?"

"No, don't bother. I'll have everything ready in no time."

Clara returned slowly to the table, finished her cursory inspection of the magazine, laid it down, glanced about the room, and wandered slowly to the writing desk. There, after surveying her friend's engagement pad, she took up a letter, examined the handwriting and postmark, put it down again, and went into the bedroom, where she paused near the dressing table, upon the glass top of which a number of silver toilet articles were neatly arranged. Also, on the dressing table stood a large photograph of Parrish in a silver frame.

Clara pushed the photograph an inch or two nearer the edge, took up a pair of manicure scissors, snipped a piece of cuticle at the corner of one of her thumbnails, and after feeling the thumb to see that it was smooth, put down the scissors and scrutinized her face in the mirror, turning her head critically from side to side. What she saw apparently satisfied her, for she now gave her attention, instead, to one of the dressing-table drawers, opening it and

reviewing its contents. After examining some handkerchiefs, which she removed from a silk case, she took up a pair of new white gloves and looked them over as a critical purchaser might have done. Then she drew forth a black net veil, and with eyes again turned toward the mirror held it outstretched before her face. Having replaced the veil she closed the drawer and opened the other, finding in the front of it a small bottle of perfume in a satin-lined box. She removed the glass stopple and sniffed the perfume appreciatively, half closing her eyes, then put the bottle back, closed the drawer, and returned to the living room just as Alice appeared from the kitchen with a small platter of cold chicken and ham garnished with lettuce leaves.

"Can't I help carry things in?" suggested Clara, stopping as she spoke.

"No, everything's ready. You sit down. I'll bring the soup directly." And Alice disappeared again through the pantry door.

Clara moved languidly to the dining room and seated herself, and almost simultaneously Alice reappeared with two steaming cups of tomato bouillon, one of which she placed before her friend.

"Um!" Clara exclaimed, sniffing, as Alice stood near her. "Isn't that a new scent you're using?"

"Yes. Do you like it? I just put on a tiny touch."

"I love it. What is it?"

"Fleur de Fée."

"Awfully expensive?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, a present?"

Alice, seating herself, nodded across the table.

"Look out," she warned, "the soup's hot."

"Dick?" asked the other.

"No; Margaret."

Margaret was her married sister in Cleveland.

"Oh!" said Clara. Then she asked, "What do you hear from Margaret?"

Alice sighed.

"I'm worried about her," she said. "She hasn't been awfully well. George's business keeps him tied up, and she won't go away without him. What she needs is a change and a rest. I've been trying to get her to come on and visit me, but she always has some reason why she can't. It's not only George and the housekeeping—it makes her nervous to leave the children."

"She's like you," Clara said. "That's the kind of wife and mother you'd be, too."

"If I could be as good a wife and mother as Margaret," Alice returned, "it would make me mighty happy." .

Clara smiled.

"Never fear," said she, "you would. You'd never consider yourself any more than Margaret does. You don't now, you know; and married you'd be that much worse."

"Worse?" repeated Alice, smiling.

"Yes, worse. It doesn't pay for a woman to be unselfish with a man. Men don't appreciate it. They'll accept all a woman will give them, and take it for granted."

"You wouldn't say George didn't appreciate Margaret, surely?"

"Of course I never saw them very much when I was in Cleveland," Clara answered, "but I should say he accepted her devotion pretty—well, pretty calmly. Not as calmly as Dick accepts yours, though."

"Dick is mighty sweet to me," Alice defended. "No man could be more thoughtful and kind. You simply don't understand Dick, my dear."

"I understand one thing," Clara retorted, "and that is, if he's so darn thoughtful and kind I should think he'd be saying something about marrying you."

"He has," Alice returned calmly, rising and taking up her empty soup cup.

"He has?"

Alice, coming around the table to get the other cup, nodded.

"I've told you that before. Dick has been perfectly square. In the beginning, when we were first interested in each other, he said he was going to be a bachelor always."

"Oh, that!" Clara said, disappointed and a little bit contemptuous. And as Alice moved toward the pantry she added, "That's when you should have dropped him like a hot cake, too!"

Alice did not reply. When she returned from the kitchen bearing plates and a bowl of lettuce-and-tomato salad, Clara continued as though there had been no interruption.

"You'll be twenty-eight pretty soon," she said. "You've got to think of your future. You ought to have been married ages ago—a girl like you, with your money and your looks. It isn't right for him to be driving other men away and—and doing nothing about it himself."

"But I keep telling you," Alice said as she began to serve the salad from the bowl on the sideboard, "that he made his position perfectly clear in the beginning."

"Yes, but what about *your* position?"

"That's understood, too. We're absolutely free—both of us."

"Yes," said the other with an ironical nod. "He's free, as he wants to be, and you're free whether you want to be or not—and you *don't* want to be!"

"Yes, I do."

Having served the salad, she had taken the plates to the table, where she was now engaged in placing a slice of chicken and a slice of ham on each.

"That is to say," pursued her friend, "you wouldn't want to marry him?" There was a dry little smile upon her lips as she gazed at the unhappy Alice, awaiting a reply.

"Not if he didn't want me," Alice insisted stoutly.

"He'd have wanted you if you'd made him."



Fork in hand, Alice paused and looked quickly at her friend.

"How?" she asked.

"By chucking all this highfalutin stuff and playing the game."

"There's nothing of a game about my friendship with Dick." She made the reply with a show of dignity, but Clara was not to be deterred.

"That's just what's the matter," she retorted. "Between a man and woman it *is* a game. A woman has to use the weapons the Lord gave her, otherwise the man has all the advantage. He can come to see her when he wants to or stay away when he wants to, but it's up to her to keep him from knowing that. Her job is to keep him on the anxious seat. That's what makes men propose: they always want what they're afraid they can't have. The trouble with you, my dear, is that you're too square with him."

"He's square with me."

"Maybe."

"Have you any reason to suppose he isn't?" demanded Alice, passing Clara's plate.

"Not except that he's a man. I wouldn't trust any man."

Alice took her own plate and sat down.

"You're so awfully cynical," she said. "I can't seem to make you see that my friendship with Dick is—"

Clara, who had begun to eat, could not wait even to masticate her salad before replying.

"I understand this much," she put in thickly: "You'd marry Dick to-morrow if he'd ask you."

"Yes. But I——"

"Wait!" said Clara, holding up her fork. "You wouldn't raise a finger to get him—isn't that what you were going to say?"

Alice, looking none too happy, nodded assent.

"I knew it," said her friend, shaking her head hopelessly. "And that's just where you lose out."

"All right then," Alice returned in a tone gentle but determined, "I'll lose out."

She looked at her plate for a moment, touched a lettuce leaf with her fork, then rose and hurried to the kitchen.

"What is it, dear?" Clara called after her.

"Nothing. I just forgot the cocoa."

She was a long time getting it, but her eyes were dry when she returned.

After that Clara permitted her to change the subject.

"There's just a chance," the guest announced as they were finishing supper, "that I'll go to Atlantic City next week sometime. Georgina Burke phoned this afternoon and invited me—that is, if they decide to go. Sam has a cold; it depends on that. If his cold gets better between now and Monday the trip's off." She laughed. "I like Sam Burke. I know he's a trifle loud, but he's all right, and he's strong for me. I amuse him, and he's awfully generous. Of course they'd pay all my expenses. Well,

I'd like to get in a few miles on the Boardwalk just about now so, much as I like Sam, I'm rooting for his cold to hang on a few days more."

"Why, Clara!" Alice was shocked but amused.

"Oh," said the other lightly, "I make no secret of it. I told Georgina the same thing and asked her to tell Sam. He likes that kind of talk—rough stuff." Then as Alice began to clear the table she, too, arose, and moving some of the dishes to the sideboard asked, "Shall we wash the dishes now?"

"No, don't you bother. I'll just set them in the pantry and do them later."

The proposal was not protested.

Later in the evening, when she was about to go, Clara spoke again of the new scent her friend was using.

"Um!" she exclaimed. "You always have such nice perfumes."

"Do you like this so much?"

"It's wonderful. It has lure, my dear."

"Lure?"

"Yes. You know—like expensive ladies in elevators at the Ritz."

Clara went to the bedroom and from the dressing-table drawer produced the little bottle in its pretty box and handed it to Clara, who drew out the stopper and inhaled ecstatically.

"Um!" she exclaimed again. "De-lish!"

She corked the bottle, put it back, closed the box and held it out to Alice. But Alice did not take it.

"No," she said, "I want you to have it."

"Oh, Alice! You dear! But I mustn't rob you!"

"Nonsense!" Alice gently pushed away the hand containing the box. "I don't think I like it as well as the kind I used before." And with a little laugh she added, "I guess lure isn't exactly my style, anyway—worse luck!"

CHAPTER IV

ALIGHTING from his car in front of Rita Coventry's house Parrish told his chauffeur to return at half-past eleven.

"And wait," he added.

The house, one of a block of English-basement residences of red brick and white stone, stood in a side street a few doors from Central Park West. Through the evening dimness he saw that the windows of the floor above, now glowing with soft light from within, were equipped with boxes in which low shrubs grew. The front door, two steps up, was of wrought iron backed by plate glass and curtains of light silk, through which sifted a pleasant amber radiance.


His ring was answered promptly by a blond young butler, evidently a Frenchman or a Swiss, who, after taking his hat, coat, and cane, led him as far as the stair landing, from which point he indicated with a polite gesture the drawing room at the front of the house on the floor above, whence came a buzz of conversation.

In his first glimpse of the room from the doorway Parrish perceived that it was spacious and that the walls and ceiling were of gray and cream colour, with

low-relief moldings and embellishments in the Adam style. Furnished "in the period," it would have been a chamber dignified and chaste. But it was not so furnished. In its heterogeneous contents he seemed to read the journal of a world traveller, a cosmopolitan with an ample, careless pocketbook, a quick, acquisitive feeling for beautiful things, and a striking disregard for the conventions—at least for those having to do with the furnishing and decoration of a house.

Inside the door he paused briefly. Rita, across the room, was half surrounded by a group of guests. Her back, which was toward him, was uncovered save for two ropes of emerald beads which passed over her shoulders and connected with her gown at the waistline. Standing thus, she appeared to be dressed only in these beads and a scant satin skirt, black and lustrous like her hair. The skirt was festooned with strings of beads, matching the fan of green ostrich plumes that dangled from a loop of velvet ribbon on her arm. She was talking and gesturing, using her hands and shoulders as he had seen her use them long ago in Paris, at Larue's.

As Larry Merrick, standing near her, caught sight of Parrish and nodded a greeting, Rita turned with a rattling of beads, and extending her hand gave him a smile that made him feel as if more lights had been turned on in the room. He advanced and took her hand. It seemed to him that he had never seen a human being so full of brilliant contrast—white



teeth contrasted with red lips, red lips against a creamy skin, and a creamy skin set off in turn by dark eyes and the jet black of her gown and hair.

Except Rita and Larry Merrick, Hermann Krauss, the Jewish banker and patron of music, was the only one of the group he knew. The others proved to be Schoen the pianist, his pretty American wife, and Mrs. Fernis, the novelist, who gushed and continually spoke to Rita, and of Rita, by her first name in a way to suggest that she was vain of the intimacy. Hardly had he been introduced when three more guests arrived—Bickford, the steel millionaire, with his girlishly dressed wife of fifty-five or sixty, and Luigi Busini, the great conductor of the opera, a man tall and dark with a beautiful profile and the look of one whose hat has been blown away and whose hair and moustache have been set on end by the same high wind.

Parrish, who had of course heard the gossip about Rita and Busini, watched them now with interest. Busini kissed her hand and looked at her ardently; but as he did the same with each of the other ladies one could hardly deduce anything from that.

The butler and a maid now appeared with trays of cocktails and appetizing little sandwiches of caviar and *pâté de foie gras*, after which the company moved in helter-skelter order to the dining room at the rear of the house on the same floor. It was an unusual dining room, resembling, rather, a conservatory, with its many plants, its large windows facing the south,

and its walls of imitation stone, stripped with green lattice, through which vines climbed from marble pots on the floor.

Parrish was pleasantly surprised to find himself placed at Rita's right, and it amused him to notice that both Krauss and Busini, seeking their seats at table, looked first at his place card, as though each expected to find his own name there.

"No, Luigi—at the other end," said Rita, indicating to Busini his seat far down the board.


The conductor was at no pains to conceal his disappointment. He gave a little shrug as he turned away.

"He is not pleased," remarked Krauss as he seated himself at Rita's left. His eyes, following Busini, twinkled. "He looked as if he wanted to slip a stiletto under your fifth rib, Mr. Parrish."

"I have spoiled Luigi," said Rita. "See—he won't look at me. He's cross as a bear." And she explained to Parrish, "He sulks that way if there's anything he doesn't like."

"I understand his disappointment," Parrish said. "You were very kind to place me here."

"No—selfish," she said lightly. "I want to know you. Luigi has sat here often enough. His performance reminds me of something that happened at a dinner in Paris years ago just after my début. It was Vasquez's first season there. He was a sensation. They were calling him the greatest barytone that ever lived. The Russian ambassador was



at this dinner but he was placed at the left of the hostess and Vasquez on her right. I sat by the ambassador. He was very charming, but he was annoyed all the same. As he was leaving the house he kissed the hostess' hand, and then, so that she could hear, said to Vasquez, 'Good-night, Monsieur. His Majesty, my august sovereign, will be much flattered when I tell him that this evening it was you who represented him.'"

Rita's was the sort of dinner at which people talk about dinners and dining. The cuisine, that is to say, was perfectly Parisian and the wines, from sherry to champagne, delicious.

Schoen told of the chef of an Italian prince who refused to prepare a meal for more than twelve. When his employer gave large dinners the chef would cook only for the dozen most prominent guests, the repasts of the remainder being prepared by his assistant, who sometimes made out a separate menu. The chef maintained that twelve was the greatest number for whom one man could cook, and that a smaller number was even better. He had a saying, "*Pas moins que les Graces, et pas plus que les Graces et les Muses.*" At last he left because his employer, who was entertaining an Archduke of Austria at luncheon, demanded that he cook for fourteen.

This, in turn, reminded Rita of a story about Brambleton, the London critic. Besides his caustic criticisms, Brambleton was famous for two things—


his love of food and of solitude and silence. He avoided people, or if he could not avoid them refused to be drawn into conversations. One day a fellow critic who more than once had crossed swords with him in print saw him alone in a restaurant. He spoke to Brambleton, but the latter did not answer. Just then the waiter put a dozen oysters on the table before him.

"Look here, Brambleton," said his confrere, "don't you think you had better invite me to lunch with you to-day?"

Brambleton shook his head and glared.

"Because it is unlucky to do what you are doing," the other persisted. "You're thirteen at table."

The dinner was all but over before Parrish realized that his neglect of Mrs. Fernis, at his own right, had verged upon rudeness. In the last few moments he turned and talked with her, trying to make up for the earlier delinquency. And yet he felt that here, much more than at the average dinner party, there was an excuse for what he had done; it was not only he whose attention had been centred on Rita; Mrs. Fernis and all the others had looked to her rather than to those beside them. Eyes drawn to Rita in the first instance by her beauty were held not only by that beauty but by some strange addictive power almost entirely apart from it: a kind of vividness which Parrish, watching her, explained to himself as being like the vital force of two or three persons combined in one. She bubbled with spirits.



Her mind and tongue were quick. She was amusing. Yet there was that about her which, even when the things she said were of no consequence, made people pause and listen. Call it personality, individuality, magnetism, charm, allurements, what you will, she had that gift, indefinable and priceless, that super something, which is granted to a few rare beings in this world, and which causes those who have it to stand out from the mass of mankind like searchlights in the night.

As the party left the dining room he managed to keep his place at her side. "I'm to see those prints?" he reminded her.

"Yes, later—if you don't mind waiting after the others go."

"Oh, thanks!" Then he asked a question about something he had wondered over: "How have you found time to interest yourself in prints—a woman as busy as you are?"

"Ah," she replied, looking at him over her white shoulder and giving him the smile, "I can say to that what Mario said, 'I have had all the follies—all.' But I'll tell you more about it later."

"About the follies?" he suggested, smiling.

"No, the prints. I don't talk of my follies. It's enough to commit them. I leave the talk to the world, and to judge from the reports I hear, the world is quite able to take care of it."

When in the drawing room coffee and cigarettes were passed Rita took both. As she lighted her

cigarette from the silver lamp held by the butler, Busini came over to her.

"I thought you were not smoking any more?" he said in Italian.

"Then, caro mio," she retorted gayly, "I have not altogether lost the power to surprise you." She blew smoke at him.

"Your upper register!" he said with grim significance, and turned away.

"Beast!" she called after him. But she was not disturbed, for she winked at Parrish, explaining, "He is trying to be as awful as he can to-night. It makes him furious when he cannot annoy me. As a matter of fact, my upper register is better than it ever was." She appealed to the others: "Isn't my upper register better than ever?"

"Indeed it is, Rita darling!" exclaimed Mrs. Fernis. "It never was so rich and full."

"Isn't it, Hermann?"

"Absolutely!" declared Krauss. "Like your figure, my dear, it continues to improve. When you are sixty I shall no longer be able to resist you. We shall go to Venice."

"Your voice is superb—superb!" put in Schoen, without waiting to be asked. "But for saying so I want an orange."

"Great goose!" she said, slapping at him with the green-plumed fan.

"I do want an orange," he insisted.



"Really? What for? Haven't you had enough to eat?"

"I do not want it to eat. I want an orange and a hairbrush. I will do tricks for you."

"Very well, child, you shall have them. Ring."

She indicated a push button near the door. Schoen rang and gave his peculiar order to the butler who went away and soon returned with the orange and the hairbrush.

"Come and see this, Rita. Come, everybody!" cried the pianist, going over to the instrument and sitting down upon the bench before it.

They gathered about him. Taking the orange in his right hand he began to roll it quickly back and forth over the black keys, at the same time playing an accompaniment with his left, producing a charming little air.

"Something of your own?" asked Krauss as he finished.

"His own?" echoed Busini with a snort. "Chopin's own! The 'Black Key Study.'"

"The orange is my part," said Schoen amiably.

"Do it again! Do it again!"

The artist, who was like a large, jovial boy, did it again, evidently enjoying his trick greatly.

"Let me do!" cried Busini, crowding his way up to the piano.

"Wait," said Rita. "What's the hairbrush for?"

She held it up, a lovely thing of gold and enamel with little wreaths of roses on the back.

"Ah!" said Schoen, assuming the mysterious air of a magician as he put down the orange and took the brush from her hand. "Now you shall see! This is perhaps my chef-d'œuvre."

Again his large left hand ran over the bass keys, while with the brush, held in his right, he played the "Ride of the Valkyries," pressing down upon the keys with the bristles. His auditors were filled with enthusiasm.

"Wonderful!" laughed Krauss, applauding. "You must stop giving recitals at Carnegie Hall, where your art is not perhaps fully appreciated, and go into vaudeville—three or four thousand dollars a week!"

Even Busini was lost in admiration, forgetting for a time to sulk.


"Now let me do!" he cried, seizing the orange and elbowing Schoen to the end of the piano bench.

His first effort was not entirely successful.

"No, no!" cried the originator of the trick. "Not that way! You hold it too tight. Let it roll in your palm." He tried to take the orange from Busini in order to illustrate, but the latter clung to it as a child clings to a toy.

"Aspetto! Let me have my chance. I want to do!" And he began again. "There!" he exclaimed, delighted, as after some practice he began to get it. "Now I do better! This is more like!"

"The bass! The bass!" admonished Schoen, eager to help. "It isn't only the orange, Luigi. You must get the bass, too!"



"I don't know the bass. I play it by ear—hearing you."

"Look—it's like this!" Schoen showed him the chords and Busini attempted it again, still without perfect success.

"Amateur!" said Rita.

"But this is the first time I try!" protested the conductor, and made a grimace at her. Then putting down the orange he said, "Now give me the hairbrush."

"It's just what you need!" Rita said with a laugh, but the other did not grasp the jest at once.

"Oh," he retorted, passing his hand over his up-standing locks, "it is my beautiful hair you do not admire this evening, carissima? And you used to admire so greatly!" He shrugged.

"You misunderstand, Luigi," she said with mock ardour. "To me your hair will always be beautiful. It will be a beautiful memory even after it is gone. For you, my dear, it is the back of the brush."

As the others laughed the face of the Italian lighted with sudden comprehension. He clapped his hands.

"Ah, je comprends! C'est ça! That is very droll. Oh, very droll, Rita!" And to the others, who had understood from the first, he began to explain: "You see what she mean? She mean I am naughty boy; I ought to have the bastone—the sponk!" He illustrated, hitting the palm of his hand with the back of the brush. Then, to Rita, admiringly: "No wonder everybody fall in love with you, chérie. You

are beautiful. So are other women. But you have esprit. That is what——”

Rita interrupted him, singing,

“Pourquoi serais-je belle
Si ce n'est pour être aimée”

“Yes, from ‘Louise,’” said Busini, “but a half tone low.” He struck a key several times with one finger, then a chord.

“He has absolute pitch, you know,” Mrs. Fernis told Parrish in an awed tone.

“Absolute pitch?”


“Yes.” She turned to Rita, saying, “Get him to show Mr. Parrish, Rita dear.”

Busini was quite willing to exhibit his strange gift. Going to the other end of the room he named, one after another, the notes making up each of many chords struck on the piano by Schoen. As he sat down afterward, amid exclamations and applause, he seemed to be in better humour than at any time during the evening.

The two bars from “Louise” which Rita had playfully sung made Parrish eager to hear more.

“Aren’t you going to sing to us?” he asked her.

He had not meant the request to be overheard by the others, but the sudden silence which ensued about them, and the eyes turned to her, showed him that he was not alone in awaiting her answer.



"Yes," she said, after an instant's hesitation, "I'll sing." The beads on her gown rattled pleasantly as she rose and moved to the piano.

"Rita must like you very much," Mrs. Fernis said to him in an undertone. "She almost never sings for her guests."

"But no one has asked her to," he returned. "I've been waiting, thinking someone else would do it; someone who knows her better than I do."

"We don't ask her."

"I ought not to have done it, you mean?"

"You didn't know the unwritten law."

"She could easily have said no."

"Not to you, evidently," said the lady with a certain air of coy intimation.

She had made him uncomfortable, but he forgot that a moment later when, after striking a chord, Rita let her golden voice fill the room.

"Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine——"

Her head was thrown back slightly, and her gaze rested, while she sang, upon the upper part of the tapestry across the room. But when at the end of the song she allowed her eyes to fall he found them meeting his. It was only a swift glance she gave him, but it thrilled him. She had looked first at him! Then, as their eyes parted, he rebuked himself. "Idiot!" he thought. "She looked at you only

because it happened to be you who asked her to sing."

Before the applause had stopped he was at her side. She had risen and closed the cover over the keyboard.

"It was the loveliest thing I ever heard!" he said, glowing with sincerity. "But I am afraid I did wrong to ask you."

"Admirable!" came Busini's voice across the room. "But why? Why not sing something good?"

"That is a good song," she replied indifferently. Then, to Parrish, "I felt like singing to-night. This sort of day makes me feel like it."

"Spring!" he answered with a sigh. "So it does me!"

"And you don't sing?"

"Not a note."

"Perhaps you have some other mode of expression for the springtime?" she suggested with a little smile.

"Auctions," said he. "I buy all sorts of curios I don't want."

"Why not the thing they call interpretative dancing? Have you tried that? Judging from pictures in the magazines, spring is the season in which to wrap a necktie around the brow and prance barefoot through the park with a tablecloth."

"One must get up at dawn for that," he objected, echoing in his tone the mock gravity of hers.

"Or stay up all night," she amended.

Mr. and Mrs. Bickford, who had sat through the evening like people entertained and a little mystified, came up in time to catch the last words Rita spoke.

"That's what we mustn't do," said the lady. "Alex is at his desk every morning at nine-thirty. Example, you know." Whereupon she and her husband said good-night.

"Is anybody going our way?" Bickford asked, pausing at the door. It was unnecessary for him to say which way theirs was. The Bickford house, on a Fifth Avenue corner, across the park, was celebrated throughout the city for its curious tower, its arches, balconies, and strange protuberances, resembling gigantic goiters carved in stone. The invitation resulted in the departure of the Schoens and Mrs. Fernis. Krauss, too, said good-night.

"Perhaps I can drop you, Mr. Parrish?" he suggested.

But before he could answer, Rita replied:

"I've asked Mr. Parrish to stay behind. I want him to see my print collection."

"You, Merrick?" said the banker. "You, Busini?"

Merrick accepted, but Busini shook his head.

"Thank you, no," he replied. "I also will stay and look at those print."

Parrish heard this with a feeling of disappointment, which, however, Rita almost instantly dispelled.

"No, you won't!" she said to the Italian; and though she said it with a smile her tone was definite

enough. "You would never look at my prints before. Now you can go home, my dear!"

"Home, Sweet Home," Busini answered, giving her a slanting smile. "That is another song silly like the one you sang. Home is not always attractive." His shrug expressed a certain resignation. "Good-night, beautiful Rita." He kissed her hand; then, bowing formally to Parrish, he said: "Good-night, sirr. I believe you will enjoy those print. I am inform that the collection of mademoiselle is large. Some examples, I believe, have merit. Perhaps others not so good. But that might be due, sometimes, to a selection too sudden." He looked at Rita as he finished: "Mademoiselle's temperament is like that. For deciding she is very quick."


Parrish was vaguely annoyed, for, although he was not certain of Busini's meaning, he sensed an indication of some kind. He bowed formally and Busini walked toward the door.

"There is this about my collection, Luigi," said Rita as he moved away: "When I find in it something not so good as I had believed it to be I quickly get rid of it. Good-night, mon ami."

Moving to the doorway she pressed a push button causing a bell to sound faintly in a distant part of the house. Then she turned to Parrish.

"Come," she said. "The prints are in the sitting room on the floor above."

As she led him up the stairway they heard the soft, metallic sound of the front door closing



behind Busini, whereupon she paused and leaning over the balustrade called the butler:

"Pierre."

"Mademoiselle?" He came running up.

"Laissez la lumière là-bas."

"Bien, mademoiselle. Merci."

He turned and descended toward the lower hall.

CHAPTER V

RITA'S sitting room bore no resemblance to the other rooms that he had seen. It was smaller, and there was about it a modernity that was aggressive and startling. The carpet was of solid black; the panel moldings on the deep ivory walls were picked out in lines of black and nasturtium colour, and the same striking combination appeared again in the mantelpiece and in the hangings at the doors and windows. Two deep, comfortable couches standing at either side of the fireplace were upholstered in black velvet, and might have given a too sombre note but for the brilliant pillows of taffeta in solid colours with which they were equipped.

"How do you like it?" she asked, seeing that he paused and looked about, on entering.

"It is very striking."

"Be frank. I've just had it done. I'm not sure I like it myself. I fell into the clutches of a decorator, a very clever and persuasive woman, who wants to do the whole house."

"Don't let her."

"I don't intend to. This sort of thing seems to me abnormal—like Strawinsky's music. I'm having a frightful time, though, keeping her out of my

bedroom. She wants to give me black-and-gold walls—originality, you know. She says my bedroom isn't original, but I tell her sleep isn't original, either."

Parrish smiled.

"How is it done now?" he asked. "Rose colour, I suppose."

"French blue and gray."

"That sounds nice."

"Would you care to see it? It's just back there." She indicated the door.

"Yes, I should like to."

"Come, then."

He noticed again the rattling of the beads as they passed down the hall. It was a sound disturbing but agreeable.

The bedroom was spacious. The French blue of the velvet carpet ran up into the window hangings, the portières and the canopy and covering of the bed, all which were of taffeta. The bed was large and much carved, with panels of basket-work let in at head and foot. All the furniture was of a cold gray tone a trifle lighter than that of the walls, and the only colour in the room other than blue and gray was in the gold of picture frames and small articles on the dressing table, in the pink roses filling a bowl upon a table and the small design of rose wreaths with which the silken draperies were bordered.

On a table, conspicuously placed, Parrish noticed a large photograph of Busini. That, however, would have seemed to him more significant had not this

room, like the sitting room and the drawing room downstairs, contained so many other framed photographs. Whatever truth there might or might not be in the gossip about Rita and Busini, she was evidently not in the least sensitive about it; nor about that story of her affair with a monarch, either, for the picture of that potentate, with a friendly inscription in his handwriting, stood on the table in the sitting room.

After a brief survey of the bedroom he exclaimed, "Oh, don't let the decorator-lady touch it!"

"You like it as it is?"

"It's exquisite. Let the decorator do her own bedroom in her own way. This room expresses you."

Indeed it seemed to fit her as a jewel-case fits its gem. Into his mind there came a vision of her as she must look in that bed when the maid brought her breakfast in that morning. He was sure she had her breakfast there, and that, doing so, she made a picture to delight the eye of an old-time French engraver. She would be propped against a mountain of soft pillows, and would wear a boudoir cap trimmed with blue ribbons and little knots of roses from beneath which locks of that dark wavy hair would escape to nestle on her shoulder. She was not the sort of woman who would look tired in the morning. Far from it! She would be pink and lovely like a baby just awake. From the moment her eyes opened there would be that brightness in their depths. She

would see the sun streaming through the curtains and would smile.

He turned to the door again.

"You were going to tell me how you became interested in prints," said he as they moved through the hall in the direction of the sitting room.

"It was the summer before I first sang 'Butterfly.' I wanted a rest and change, and I thought a trip to Japan would give me atmosphere for the part. Well, it gave me a taste for lacquer and jade and prints, at all events."

They were in the sitting room now, beside a table on which were several large portfolios bound in Japanese silk and fastened with little pegs of ivory.

Rita opened the cover of the uppermost portfolio and began to turn the cardboard sheets on which the prints were mounted.

"This light is poor," she said, pausing after they had looked at two or three of the pictures. "Let's put them on the floor under the tall lamp."

As Parrish carried the bulky volume over and laid it on the rug in the lamplight Rita took a cushion from the couch, tossed it to the floor and dropped down upon it.

"I'll turn for you," she said. "You can stand. That ought to give you about the right distance."

The first prints were primitives—a Gonshiro, several Morinobus and early Harunobis, interesting as examples of the art in its beginnings; but presently she came to works by later masters—Utamaro, Yei-

shi, Toyokuni; superb compositions splashed with rich soft colours like those of old brocades.

Rita knew about prints. The selection was generally good; where there were imperfections she recognized them, pointing out that this one was weak in colour, that one a late impression made after the wooden blocks had been trimmed at the edges, or that another had been creased, or torn and mended.

But though his interest in this art was genuine enough, and though many of these prints were worth seeing, Parrish found it increasingly difficult to give them his attention. How may a man yield his eyes to minor constellations when in the sky is Venus, brightest and most beautiful of stars? Continually his glances wandered from the printed images to the lovely living image bending over them. In the soft glow of the lamp the beads on her gown shone like the jewels of some fabled princess of the East; her flesh was luminous and rosy; fascinating lights gleamed in the dark waves of her hair.

By the time the first portfolio had been run through he was aware of strain. Carrying the portfolio back to its place upon the table, and bringing the second, he congratulated himself on having so far been coherent. But there were four portfolios! Too many!

Now she was showing him Hokusais—the thirty-six Views of Fuji.

What a back! How flat and flexible! And as she turned the pages, how beautiful the soft play of the

muscles! Other women had pretty backs, but it was simply cruel to compare another back with Rita's. Muttering something about Hokusai's detail, he flung a cushion to the floor and dropped down beside her. Yet here, without looking at her directly, he continued to be disturbed. Every time she turned a page he was aware of the white loveliness of her arm and shoulder near him. Presently he began to feel something like an electric current. It seemed to emanate from her arm and jump across to his. Did she feel it, too? Apparently not, for she continued calmly to turn the prints, commenting upon them as she went along.

"Let's stop!" he heard himself exclaim in a voice that sounded strange to him.

He had no sooner spoken than the critical part of his mind came into play, telling him that kind of talk would not do at all. Suppose she were now to ask him why he wished to stop looking at the prints—what would he say? If he had good sense he would say he had a headache—and go home. But *would* he do that? Or would he blurt out recklessly some further wildness?

But Rita did not ask him. She did not speak. Dimly he was aware that she reached out and closed the portfolio. She had turned her head and was looking at him. She did feel that current! Her eyes told him so! He leaned, gazing into them with straining eagerness like that of one who seeks to penetrate the depths of some unfathomable sea.

"Why—they're blue!" he murmured huskily.

The shadow of a smile showed in them. He leaned a little more. Now he could see nothing but her eyes. The rest of the world was nebulous. He was shipwrecked on those sweet blue seas.

CHAPTER VI

RITA descended with him to the lower hall as he was leaving. The butler, according to her direction, had left the lights burning there. On a carved Italian chest reposed his coat, hat, and cane. As he started to slip into the coat she stepped behind him and taking hold of the collar helped him on with it. Then she gave either shoulder a touch of adjustment as if she loved to give it.

He turned quickly, and as they stood there silent for a moment he felt her fingers working softly at the edge of his lapel. How sweet to have her doing that! There was a lovely fragrance in her hair against his cheek.

"My beautiful!" he whispered. "Oh, my beautiful!"

She raised her eyes to his, and in a voice low and lovely sang again in French the passage from "Louise":

"Why should I be beautiful
If it is not to be loved?"

"Rita," he murmured, "I love you so!"

"It's spring," she answered, smiling.

"No, it's you! I'm mad about you!"

"You think so."

"Not 'think'—*know*! Tell me, do you care for me as I do for you?"

She patted his cheek.

"Rita, you do care, don't you?"

"Don't you know?"

That did not satisfy him.

"How much?" he demanded.

She raised her lips. Ah, that was better!

"When am I to see you again?" he asked. "Can you dine with me to-morrow night?"

"To-morrow night I sing."

"Supper, then, afterwards?"

"I'm sorry—I've promised to go to Frémecourt's birthday party."

"When, then?"

She thought for a moment.

"I'll telephone," she said.

He wrote on a visiting card his address and his telephone numbers uptown and down.

"When will you telephone?"

"To-morrow."

"Of course. But what time?"


"Before I go to the opera."

"That would be around six?"

She nodded.

"Oh, my dear," he said in a low eager voice, "I'll be waiting all day for that call!"

He opened the door, but paused reluctant on the threshold.



She gave him a gay little wave of dismissal, saying, "Good-night."

"I love you!" he said, and closed the heavy door behind him.

In the vestibule he paused until the amber lights within were extinguished. Then he walked toward his limousine, which was standing at the curb. In the sky to the east he saw the first pink glow of approaching dawn. Somewhere overhead a sparrow chirped as if to tell him he was not the only creature in the world awake. He spoke to his chauffeur, then stepped to the running board and shook him gently by the shoulder until his eyes opened.

As he journeyed homeward thoughts of Rita sang through his mind. Yesterday morning he had called life monotonous. Yesterday morning! He had not even met her then! He had come to her house a few hours since, all but a stranger. Of those who were there he had known her least. How long ago that seemed!

Life monotonous? Life's little periods of dullness were nothing but a background, like the gray wall of a gallery against which splendid pictures show more splendid still. In the gallery of his life there hung but one picture now. Rita! Rita of the golden voice! Rita, young, brilliant, famous, beautiful, all that was desirable! Rita, who in one splendid blinding flash had let him know she cared for him! For him!

He tried to conjure up her likeness, to visualize her face, but the features at which he had so lately gazed in adoration would not come into focus for him now. In his mind he could see her strong little hands, her tapering arms, her shoulders; and he could see the colour of her: the pallor of her skin, the red of her lips, the glistening white of her even little teeth, the shimmering black of her hair, the deep blue of her eyes; but try as he would, he could not harmonize these elements and make them blend into one clear and satisfying image.

The failure disappointed him. It was that way sometimes, though, when one tried to think how certain people looked. Why, he wondered? Why was it that the likeness of one person should be vague when a perfect picture of another could be summoned to the mind at will? Take, for example, Alice. He could always make himself see Alice. He had only to think of her. He could see her now almost as clearly as though she stood before him in the flesh.

Alice! His heart sank. There was a situation to be faced! That couldn't go on. He must find some way to break with her. Cruel? Yes. But he had not willed it so. It was life. Life was cruel; crueler to women than to men; it ought not to be so, but it was.

How was the thing to be managed? Alice was so sweet; she needed him so. What would become of her? Like a black cloud the sense of his responsi-

bility, the responsibility he had always striven to avoid, rolled down upon him.

But this was no time to be wrestling with the problem of Alice. It was a problem to be met in the full light of day, when he was at his best. For the present he must put Alice out of his mind. He did put her out of his mind; over and over again he put her out; he perspired with the effort of it. But always she came back. Through mental doors of which he had no knowledge until they opened at her touch, she reappeared and reappeared, a silent, gentle, terribly insistent ghost.

CHAPTER VII

ARISING at nine next morning, Parrish felt that he had visited the boundaries of sleep but had not for a single moment crossed them. He had lain in his bed with eyes closed, his mind whirling in a wild but not unpleasant phantasmagoria, neither real nor dream. Having bathed, dressed, and breakfasted he appraised his feelings. He was not fatigued, but felt upon the contrary a slight exhilaration, like that of one who in the morning continues to be buoyed up by last night's alcohol.

As he was about to leave his apartment the telephone rang. Of course it would be Alice. He did not want to talk with Alice now. His first impulse was to have Ito say he had left for the office. Yet somehow he did not want to do that, either. It did not seem fair, and he wished to be as fair with Alice as the circumstances would permit. Besides, was there not a chance of its being Rita? Only the faintest shadow of a chance, to be sure, but—— He had a vision of her sitting in that pretty bed of hers with a telephone instrument in her hands. Suppose she had awakened thinking of him, and was calling up just to say good morning!

Quickly he turned back and answered.

"Good morning, dear."

Of course he had known it would be Alice. She wanted, as usual, to chat.

"I hope you had a good time last night?"

"Oh, good enough."

"The prints were nice?"

"Yes."

"A large collection?"

For some curious reason he thought of Busini.

"I'll tell you about it to-night," he said. "We'll go out to dinner. I must run now. I'm short of time."

"I'll see you about five?"

"No, I have an appointment late in the afternoon. I'll not get there much before seven."

"Earlier if you can," she said in that sweet voice with its faint note of wistfulness.

"Yes—of course." As quickly as he could he terminated the conversation.

Ah! Now he knew what had brought Busini into his mind. A phrase used by Alice had recalled the parting utterance of the Italian: "A large collection."

Last night he had sensed an indirection without grasping its significance. Stupid of him! Yet in fairness to himself, how could he have understood it then? Busini had, at that juncture, foreseen more than he himself would have dared to foresee, and had prophesied in sneering parable. Not very flattering, certainly, to be likened to one carelessly selected

print out of a portfolio-full! And as to the double meaning in that reference to Rita's "collection"—that only showed how far a jealous man could stoop.

Jealousy! That clearly was at the bottom of it all. Perhaps there was a certain amount of truth in the gossip connecting Rita's name with that of the conductor, but however that might be, it was self-evident that she had discarded him—what other meaning could one read into her retort to him as he was leaving her house? She had answered his parable in kind, telling him that when she found an unworthy item in her collection she got rid of it at once, and she had pointed the shaft with a good-night. That barb must have lacerated!

What if some of these tales were true? What if it were true that Rita had cruised the Mediterranean in the royal yacht? What if, as they said, she had used the private car of Tilghman Keppler? What of it? In one sense was not all that to her credit? By her gifts she had lifted herself from obscurity and made herself a personage, with the prerogatives of a personage. She was too big to play the game according to the rules laid down for ordinary women. She could make her own rules. Moreover, these stories concerning her supposed love affairs were always based on rumour alone. It was "They say——" "A friend of mine tells me——" "I have heard——" And it was not, upon the whole, harsh gossip, but rather amiable, or even hopeful. People talked about her, but they were proud to know her—

prouder, it sometimes seemed, because of these very stories. She was sought after by the aristocracy of brains and achievement.

She herself was frank enough. What had she said to him last night? "I have had all the follies." A confession, surely, but one showing in what light she looked upon the past. No sentimental adventure, he took it, had ever seriously scarred her heart. Just affairs—follies. Busini, for instance. If she had ever cared deeply for Busini she could not have dismissed him last night so cavalierly. As for the King, it was policy for an opera singer to be gracious to a king; or for the matter of that, to any very rich man who was a patron of the arts—men like Hermann Krauss and Tilghman Keppler.

In his own case, praise heaven, there could be no such motive! He and Rita were merely man and woman. It was as a woman, not as a prima donna, that she had shown herself to him—a woman fearless, eager, glorious. More than that, they met as man and woman seldom meet, on an absolutely equal footing. There would be no raking up of bygones on either side. Let the dead past bury its dead. They had found each other. Life was all future, now, for both of them. With such radiant reflections his mind was filled as he headed for his office.

On his way home that afternoon, as upon the day before, he found spring seething on Fifth Avenue. Twice in the course of his march uptown he stopped:

first at a florist's, where he selected a great sheaf of roses for Rita; then at his haberdasher's—for at times the human, like the feathered male, is fain to celebrate with brilliant plumage.

Beyond the surging sidewalk mob he saw, as he left the shop, a green-and-yellow bus go lumbering down the street. It was a new bus shining with fresh paint, looking for all the world like a huge double-decked flower box abloom with pretty faces under pretty hats. A flash of blue and silver amid the swifter moving traffic near the centre of the street drew his eye to a bright roadster which by the look of it might have emerged a moment since from behind a plate-glass show window. The unaccompanied young woman at the wheel, so consciously debonair, had also that appearance of fashionable costly freshness.


"Behold us—spring models!" car and driver seemed to chorus.

There was something very nice about a roadster. It occupied a place in motordom not filled by any other type of car. He would have to get a roadster after things picked up a little in the Street.

"Taxi?" invited the chauffeur of a prowling public vehicle.

Glancing up, Parrish saw that the cab, though by no means new, was resplendent with varnish freshly put on.

Spring! And Rita! But he would not hear from Rita until six.



Half-past five found him in his library sitting by the desk on which the telephone reposed. There wasn't any news in the papers any more. A weak market was no news certainly; and for the rest there was only the usual assortment of robberies, murders, fires, motor accidents, divorces. He dipped into several editorials, but found no interest in them. Even his favourite frivolous column, Peek-a-Boo, yielded him but a single smile.

He threw the paper aside. Now at any instant the telephone would ring. Was Rita sitting waiting, too, he wondered? Would she call him exactly at the appointed time?

Ah, six! The clock was striking. He reflected that women were sometimes peculiar in these matters. What was it about them that made them like to keep men waiting? Even Alice, least artful of her sex, had kept him waiting once or twice when he first knew her. Woman stuff! Well, if it pleased Rita to make him wait a little, by all means let her do it; he could endure it, though punctuality was, in his eyes, one of the high virtues. It hadn't taken Alice long to find that out. Rita, too, would learn better when they had known each other for a while.

At brief intervals his eyes lifted to the face of the grandfather's clock which had for so many years told off the hours at Blenkinswood. The hands were bending to a new angle now. He wondered whether, on that sleepy old plantation, time had ever dragged

itself away so slowly. Perhaps the clock was fast. He compared it with his watch. No, it was right.

He rose and paced the rug. Something must have happened to delay her. She was a busy person. Innumerable things might have come up—unavoidable things. She might have callers and be waiting eagerly for them to go. Or again it might be that she was one of those women who are by nature careless about time. He had heard it said that artistic people were oftentimes that way. To her, six might mean merely the general neighbourhood of six. Perhaps she was now having tea—she had told him she never dined on evenings when she was to sing. Or perhaps she was adding the last touches to her toilet—she had to go to Frémecourt's birthday party afterward. How lovely she would look! He wished that he might see her before she went to the party. He wished he knew Frémecourt. He had never liked that big basso. He looked so gross.

Continuing to pace the rug he became engaged with the pattern, following it with his feet. There was a place in the corner where he had to take a short step or else go over into the border. In his present frame of mind this annoyed him. In the back of his thoughts was an incoherent wish that the rug had been a little shorter or a little longer to match the length of his stride.

Could she have misunderstood the arrangement? Could she have thought he was to call her? No, it

had been her proposal. "I'll telephone"—those were her words.

A promise was a promise. What would become of business—his brokerage business, say—if everyone were careless about verbal agreements? A person's word ought to be as good as a promissory note. Here it was seventeen minutes after six! Something must be the matter. If she did not telephone by half-past six he would ring her up. He took the telephone directory and looked for her name. Three Coventrys were listed, but she was not among them.

As the half hour struck he called Information and asked for Rita's number. But he did not get it. It was a private wire, Information said; the number could not be divulged. When he tried to argue the switchboard sibyl cut him off.

Either Larry Merrick or Hermann Krauss would undoubtedly be able to tell him the number, but for some obscure self-conscious reason he did not wish to ask them. He would do it if he had to, but would try Mrs. Fernis first.

A maid answered. Mrs. Fernis was out, she said. He requested her to look up Rita's number on Mrs. Fernis's telephone list.

Well! At last he had found a girl who was obliging and intelligent! She gave him the number, whereupon he thanked her quickly and hung up the receiver before she had a chance to ask his name. Now he would find out what the matter was!

But he did not find out. Pierre, the butler, who

answered Rita's telephone, informed him blandly that mademoiselle was not at home.

"How long since she went out?" Parrish was ashamed of the question, but he burned to know.

"I really can't say, sir. Is there any message?"

"No," growled Parrish. "Or rather—yes. Ask mademoiselle to call me up whenever she gets in." For safety's sake he gave his number.

"Mademoiselle will be late, sir."

"I know she'll be late. It doesn't matter how late she is. Kindly give her my message."

"Yes, sir."

He disliked that blond young servant. Probably he did know when Rita went out. It stood to reason that he knew. But trust a butler not to tell you anything, whether there is anything to tell or not.

It was almost seven. He was due at Alice's, yet here he was, not even dressed for dinner. He went to his room. He did not feel like dressing. He did not feel like going out. He did not feel like seeing people. He did not feel like talking to anybody. But he must hurry. If he didn't get out of here pretty soon Alice would be calling up.

CHAPTER VIII

ARRIVING at Alice's building he did not go to her apartment, but had the hall man telephone to her that he was waiting. Almost immediately she descended.

"Why didn't you come up?" she asked as they drove away.

He made his lateness the excuse.

"I was beginning to worry," she said.

"For heaven's sake, why?"

"You're usually so punctual."

"Well, I couldn't help it. I was delayed. I'm sorry." His tone was almost brusque. He was gazing straight ahead through the front window, but was aware that she turned to look at him as she replied gently:

"Of course I know that."

"Why are you finding fault then?"

"Finding fault?" she repeated, astonished and hurt. "I'm not finding fault, dear. It's only that you mean so much to me, and with all these accidents they have in the streets——"

She gave a little shudder and left the sentence unfinished. He was ashamed.

"I ought to have let you know I was delayed," he

said in a kinder tone, still without looking at her, "but I didn't want to take the time to telephone. I was thinking we could have a quick dinner and go to a show. They say this new thing 'Gladys' is pretty good."

"Oh—the theatre?"

"I thought it would be pleasant, yes." Then he acknowledged the disappointment he detected in her voice by adding, "But if you'd rather not we don't have to."

"No; I want to do whatever you want," she put in quickly. "I just thought—you've been away, and all—I thought we could go back after dinner, and you could smoke and we'd talk. I got such a lovely present to-day, too. I want to show it to you. Margaret sent me the sweetest picture of herself and the children. You know the little girl is named for me."

"Yes," he said.

"And it's getting on toward eight," she continued. "We'd be late for the theatre. But if you——"

"Doesn't matter how late you are for a musical show."

"No, certainly not; and we needn't eat much."

"Still," he said, "if you really don't want to go——"

"No, no! I'm glad to, honestly. Just so we're together I don't care." She touched his hand. "Oh, Dick, you don't know how nice it is to see you!"

"It's nice to see you, too," he returned, pressing her fingers. Then, grateful to her for giving him his

way, as he had known she would, and feeling that he had not said enough, he went on apologetically: "I can't imagine it's being nice to see me, though. I know I'm an utterly unsatisfactory person to be with this evening, Alice. I'm as restless as a cat. That's why I thought of the theatre—something bright to take our minds off things."

"There's nothing the matter, is there?" she asked tenderly.

"Oh, no; nothing special." He sighed. "Apparently there just isn't any bottom to this market. And a lot of little things have bothered me to-day. You know how it goes sometimes."

Feeling as he did, he found it pleasant, after all, to be with Alice—someone to whom he could grumble, even though he could not grumble about the one thing that was on his mind.

"I wish I could help you." Even more definitely than her words, her eyes, with their expression of solicitude, informed him of that wish.

"You do," he assured her honestly, looking into her face with a peculiar and not too happy little smile. "You help a lot, my dear. You're a mighty comfortable person to be with."

And she was. She was the sort of woman who, when the waiter hands her a menu, lays it down and says to her escort: "You order, please."

The head coat-room boy at the Tuileries, the quiet and fashionable French restaurant at which

they dined, possessed a gift for obtaining, at the last moment, seats for the most popular theatrical performances, the one provision being that the purchaser should be willing to pay well for the service. And the mere fact that one dined at the Tuileries was proof of willingness to pay.

The place was dedicated to the affluent, critical, and self-indulgent. Two could dine excellently at the Tuileries for approximately twenty-five dollars—this sum including, in this post-Volstead period; a bright yellow beverage at twelve dollars a quart, which was served only to guests known to the management, and was mentioned with wise glints of the eye, by the waiters, as “special cider,” although it tasted so precisely like sauterne that it was sometimes ordered by that name by those lacking a full degree of delicacy.

The dining room at the Tuileries was not too large, and was decorated with a restrained elegance which knew neither red nor gold nor marble. The tables stood upon soft carpet, not too close together; the chairs were comfortable, and the cushioned benches against the walls more comfortable still; the cuisine was irreproachable, the waiters sympathetic as only the most expert French waiters know how to be, and among the guests were always to be seen celebrities and beautifully costumed women. And best of all, one paid not only for what one got but for what one was spared. There was no orchestra.

A few years earlier Parrish could have bought a box with seats for six for what he gave to-night for two seats for "Gladys." But his two seats were in the third row on the aisle. No one knew better than the coat-room boy where patrons of the Tuileries preferred to sit.

When they arrived at the theatre the first act was over, but once the curtain rose they had no difficulty in picking up the thread of story.

The star, a pretty Broadway favourite, figured as a Russian grand duchess who had escaped the revolution and come to New York with her guardian, a middle-aged prince with comic legs. Incognito, the two were working in a restaurant, he as a waiter, she as a kitchen maid. Poor though they were, they had brought with them elaborate wardrobes, and they were thus able to lead a dual life, going at times into the fashionable world to which their titles gave them access.

A young man with wavy golden hair, a tenor voice, and wealthy parents, fell in love with the beautiful kitchen maid, but did not recognize her when he met her in black velvet at a ball; nor did the lank society woman recognize the prince of the night before in the waiter who spilled things on her and tripped and fell with trays of dishes.

These confusions of identity lasted through several scenes enriched with songs and specialties, but were cleared up at the end when the kitchen maid, having fled her sweetheart, was suddenly revealed to

him standing at the head of an impressive flight of stairs, up centre, in a prismatic gown which was the climax of the show—a gown which took the honours of the evening from the girl, the librettist, the composer, and even the Italian master of melody with whose famous operatic themes the composer was apparently familiar.

As the sumptuous garment descended the stairs to meet the lover, the truth burst upon him. The person it contained and embellished was of royal blood and therefore fit to be accepted on terms of social equality by any American family, however wealthy. The young man put his arm around the gown, and from the careful way he did it the audience knew that he would cherish it as long as that show should live.

At least so far as Parrish was concerned, the evening's offering had served its deadening purpose. His eyes had been engaged with bright stage pictures, his ears with trifling jests and melodies, his mind with nothing. But as his limousine nosed its way cautiously through the glittering inferno of the after-theatre streets, reverberating with the snarls of angry motor horns and the shrill whistle-blasts of traffic policemen, he began to think again. He did not want to, but he could not help it.

"You'll come up for a little while?" Alice suggested hopefully as they turned into the lofty cañon of Park Avenue, with its double asphalt trail.

"It's pretty late."

"How would you like me to fix you some bacon and eggs?"

"No; nothing to eat, thanks."

"You look tired."

"I am, rather."

"Then you're right—you'd better go home and to bed. I did want you to see the photograph of Margaret and the children, though. It's *so* sweet."

"How is Margaret?"

He asked the question not so much because of interest in her married sister, whom he had never seen, as to keep her talking of matters unrelated to him.

"I'm worried about her. She's all run down. George's business keeps him tied up so he can't take long vacations, and Margaret won't go away for any length of time without him. I ask her here—time and again I've asked her—but there's always some reason why she thinks she can't come. If it isn't George it's the children. Instead, she's always urging me to come out there."

"Naturally," he said, "when she's so fond of you. Of course you haven't been home often." And as the car drew near her door he added: "I believe I will stop in for a few minutes."

She gave a little sigh of contentment.

"I didn't want to urge you," she told him, "but I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't stopped in. I've felt lately as if things weren't—I don't know—as if you were different somehow."

"Nonsense," he said. He was glad the car was stopping.

"Well, that's the way I've felt."

"You shouldn't get ideas like that," he said.

Going up in the elevator he made small talk about the musical comedy. She gave him her latchkey, and when he unlocked the door preceded him into the living room, turning on the lamps. Then, as he had slipped off his overcoat, she came and led him to "his" chair, where she made him comfortable, tucking a pillow behind him as a trained nurse might for an invalid; after which she brought the photograph and, placing it in his hands, perched upon the arm of the chair where she could look at it over his shoulder.

"Very nice," said he.

"Did you ever see a sweeter picture?"

"Don't believe so." He continued to look at it.

"Margaret isn't so pretty as you are."

"Oh, isn't she, though! You wouldn't say that if you could see her. She's a regular little madonna. And did you ever see two such darling children? Georgie's such a serious little thing, and little Alice— isn't she adorable? Just look at her hair, too— naturally curly."

"Yes, very pretty."

She rested her cheek against his temple, gazing at the photograph. Presently he stirred a little, dislodging her from the position, and, turning his head, looked up at her asking:

"You say Margaret has been urging you to come out and visit?"

"Oh, she's always doing it. Even now that I have my own apartment in New York, she and George insist that their home is really my home—the dears! And of course in a way it is."

"Yes, of course," he agreed; then: "Well, why don't you take a little run out there?"

"But I was out there last fall," she answered almost defensively.

"For two or three days."

"A week," she corrected. "And I've been there three other times, remember—I mean since I met you." She had a way of dating time in that fashion.

"But," he went on, gently persistent, "if your sister isn't very well——" He left the sentence unfinished.

Alice sighed.

"Of course I've been thinking about that," she said. "I do want to see them all, and I hate to have Margaret feeling hurt because I don't come oftener. And little Alice—being her godmother——"

"Yes," he encouraged, "naturally she wants to see more of her Aunt Alice."

She nodded.

"And Georgie's so sweet, too. They're the dearest pair of youngsters! But"—again she sighed—"well, I guess you know why I don't want to go, don't you?" She straightened, looking at him with eyes luminously tender.

"You find it dull?" he suggested, wishing to fend off the declaration.

"Oh, no. It's not half bad. They have a pretty house and the people are nice—at least they seem so to me, being a Middle Westerner. Of course they aren't like New Yorkers; perhaps you'd think them provincial; but they're mighty comfortable to be with."

"I'm sure of it. In fact, I've often wondered that you didn't spend more time with your sister."

"You've wondered?" She looked surprised and somewhat hurt. "You think I ought to? Surely you know why I haven't, Dick. Why, at first you didn't want me to go! You didn't like it if I even spoke of it. You said you'd be so lonesome. You told me——"

"I'm afraid I've been very selfish," he said.

"No, I wanted to be with you as much as you wanted me. You know that, dear."

"Perhaps," said he sombrely, "we've both been thinking too much of what we wanted."

"Not you. It's no fault of yours if I——"

"Yes, it is. I have no right to come between you and your only sister."

"Come between us?" she repeated, astonished.

"Why, you haven't done anything like that! Margaret and I adore each other."

"She's hurt because you don't go oftener."

"Not hurt, exactly. It's just that she—she misses me, because after Father and Mother died we were always together."

"Until you came East," he added. "That's where my responsibility begins."

"But I didn't have to stay East if I didn't want to."

"That's not the point." He gazed at her gravely.

"Alice, I think you ought to take a run out there. It would probably make Margaret feel better if she could just have a look at you."

"I thought I'd go early in the summer."

"You ought to go right now."

"Now? Oh, I couldn't!"

"Why not?"

"A lot of things I have to do."

"What?"

"Well, I want to clean house—and I've ordered some clothes."

"Nonsense! Those things will wait."

"I don't want to leave you," she declared; "not when you're feeling the way you are."

"I?" he said, taken aback. "Why, I'm all right."

But she shook her head.

"Something's been troubling you."

"Oh, business," said he, "but that's only another reason why you might better go now. I can't tell when I'll be called out of town again. I'm going to be frightfully rushed in the next few weeks. If you were out there with your sister I'd know you were all right. I'd know you weren't waiting around for me."

"But, Dick dear," she interposed, "you mustn't feel that way about me. That means I'm a drag on

you—the very thing above all others that I never want to be.”

“No, not a drag,” he corrected. “But honestly, Alice, I won’t be happy until this thing is set right.”

“Then I’ll go, of course.”

“That’s the girl! Now the question is, when?”

“Next week sometime?”

“Why wait until next week? Why not now—to-morrow?”

“To-morrow?” The idea seemed to take her breath away.

“Yes, the sooner the better. The sooner you go the sooner you’ll be back.”

“But I——”

“To please me,” he urged in a final appeal the effectiveness of which he well knew.

“Well, then——”

She was assenting, though a little doubtfully. At once he became expansive.

“Spendid!” He threw an arm about her waist. “I’ll stop and get your tickets on the way down in the morning. You can go in the late afternoon and be in Cleveland early next day. You’d better wire them to-night that you’re coming. I’ll be around to drive you to the station.” Then, perhaps because she looked a trifle dazed, causing him to fear that she was still uncertain, he added encouragingly, “It’s just possible that I’ll be going to Chicago again, and if I do we might arrange to meet on the train coming back.”

Immediately she brightened.

"Oh, that would be lovely! Maybe you could get off and come up and meet Margaret and George. And I'd love to have you see the children. You probably think it's just because they're my niece and nephew that I talk so much about them, but it's not. They're really—— Do you think you could stop off?"

"Well," he said, "we'll see."

"In about a week, you think?"

"I can't say surely yet. I'll let you know as soon as I know myself. The main thing now is for you to get started. We can fix up the rest later." Then observing that she looked cast down again, he patted her shoulder reassuringly, exclaiming in a voice intended to be stimulating, "Buck up, my dear! Think how happy you're going to make them all! You mustn't be looking like Grief on a monument, you know!"

"I shall miss you awfully," she said.

"No, no! You're going to have a fine time. You'll see! Why, you may meet some fellow out there who'll make you forget all about me."

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that, Dick."

"Why be so hideously serious, dear?"

"Well, I am—about you. I don't see how you can joke about such things. You know that no one else could ever——"

"Of course I know." Again he patted her shoulder.

"I'm always thinking of you," she went on. "Every night of my life I pray for you the same as for Margaret and George and the children."

"You sweet girl!"

He rose to his feet; she followed, standing close beside him and looking up into his face as she asked, "Will you miss me?"

"Of course."

"Much?"

"Lots." He kissed her lightly. "Now it's time for me to be running along."

"Already?"

"It's after twelve."

She glanced at the clock.

"Only five minutes after."

"Yes, but you've a busy day ahead of you, packing and getting off. And I'm tired."

She made no further effort to detain him. But in the hall, just as he was leaving, she flung her arms around him and for a moment clung to him like a frightened child.

CHAPTER IX

WITHIN the hour Parrish, in pyjamas and dressing gown, was settled in a comfortable position on his bed. At his back were three large pillows, and a good light fell over his shoulder upon the book which he hoped would keep his thoughts engaged until Rita's call should come. He had switched the telephone off from his study to the extension instrument at his bedside, which he could reach at the first sound of the bell.

But there would be a long wait before the bell would ring. She had sung "Aïda" to-night and "Aïda" ran rather late, as he remembered it—until about half-past eleven. Then there was all that dark make-up to be removed before she could dress. That meant three quarters of an hour at least. By now she was at Frémecourt's, but she would hardly be leaving there before two hours had passed. It would be three or four o'clock in the morning when she reached home and got his message.

But would she get it? He had been explicit enough with Pierre, certainly; but would Pierre, in passing on his word, lay stress enough upon the fact that he wished her to call him up regardless of the

hour? He lacked confidence in Pierre. This business of communicating always through a third person, and that a butler who spoke usually in French, was irritating—irritating as the devil! So much depended upon Rita's understanding the messages he left! It wasn't a mere case of "Call me up some day." He must hear from her! He must! Worn out as he was, he felt he could not sleep until he heard her voice.

The large volume in his hands was admirably suited for ordinary bedtime reading. It was the first volume of the memoirs of a British diplomatist who had spent the past half century in various capitals, and who described in an easy rambling style events he had witnessed in those capitals: a book of gilded gossip and anecdote which could be opened at any point and closed at any point—a first essential in a bedtime book.

But this was not, apparently, the kind of reading Parrish needed now. Time and again he found that his eyes had traversed pages while his thoughts were otherwise engaged. He was neither reading coherently nor thinking coherently. He would turn back and reread, endeavouring to concentrate, but only to find himself presently drifting again into dreamlike speculations and imaginings, wherein he saw himself with Rita in foreign places and spectacular surroundings. Now they would be strolling along the borders of some sapphire lake in the North Italian hills, now dining in a brilliant res-

taurant at Monte Carlo, now roaming the garden of a villa at Taormina—a villa sparkling white against the green mountainside, with the sea spread out below, and smoke-plumed *Ætna* lifting its white crest through a far-away blue haze.

At two the striking of the old clock in the study roused him. He had been lying with closed eyes, the open book propped against his knees. Once more he began to read. There was a description of a ball and supper at the Winter Palace, vast and beautiful apartments lighted by thousands of candles—a noble company. He seemed to see Rita there. Constantinople, the Bosphorus, the Golden Horn—a succession of strange places, strange people, strange happenings, always with Rita at his side.

Now they were on the stage at the opera. No, not the opera. They were standing at the prow of a great galley surging through a summer sea. Richly coloured sails bellied in the soft, sweet wind. Rita was dressed in trailing robes of white brocade. Her glorious dark hair was hanging about her shoulders. There was music. She was singing to him, but in a language he did not know. The sailors, too, were speaking a strange tongue. He listened, spellbound.

Then came Alice. Sailors held her roughly by the wrists. They were dragging her to the ship's side. They were going to throw her into the sea! Rita was not looking at them; she did not know what was happening. He tried to tell her, but she could not understand. She continued to sing, smiling at him,

and while she sang there was a charm upon him—he was unable to move.

The sailors were lifting Alice now. Something must be done to save her. She looked at him imploringly, but he stood horror-stricken, rooted to the spot. He heard her pleading with them, but when he tried to shout and stop them, he was dumb.

Now they were holding her out over the water. He could see it rushing by below. In a moment she would be gone. Rita still smiled and sang her song. In agony he watched. What were they waiting for? Ah, yes, the signal! They were awaiting the signal, which, he somehow knew, was to be the ringing of a bell. Then they would let her fall. That bell must not ring! Oh, it must not!

But it did ring, and as he heard it the whole scene faded out. In an instant he was wide awake, trembling and perspiring with the terror of that dream.

One thing, however, he knew he had not dreamed. A bell had in truth rung. It had awakened him. Even now he seemed to hear the echo of its last reverberations.

The telephone! Rita!

He snatched the instrument from the stand beside his bed and answered.

For a moment there was a silence on the wire. Then came the droning voice of the operator, "Number, please?"

Without a word he hung up the receiver.

Through the net curtains gently swaying in his

open windows he saw daylight. He squinted at the little clock upon his dresser. Twenty minutes to eight. He heard his servant pass down the hall, open the front door, and say good morning to the elevator man, who always brought the mail and newspapers. It was the doorbell he had heard—only the doorbell.

He reached above his head and turned off the reading light. As he moved, the book of memoirs slipped from the bed and fell with a dull bump and flap of leaves to the floor. One of the tassels of his dressing gown was digging into his side where he had lain upon it as he slept. The night was gone. Another day had dawned; and not a word from Rita.

For a time he lay there miserable. He ached. But he must get up. There was that infernal tassel to encourage him, and there was so much to be done to-day. He must buy Alice's tickets, go to the office, and come up later to see her off.

And Rita—that matter must be definitely settled. The waiting, the uncertainty, were no longer to be endured. He had not known a moment's peace since he first laid eyes on Rita. She was driving him mad.

He jumped up, hurried through his toilet, bolted his breakfast, and went out. From the Grand Central Station he telephoned to Alice that he had secured accommodations on the Cleveland Limited and that he would call at six to drive her to the train. Then, anticipating her, he added, "I'll come be-

fore six if I can, but there's no telling about that until I get to the office."

There! That much was done.

But, oh, this question of Rita! Why couldn't he see through it? Generally, he felt, he understood women and their ways. Certainly his friends, troubled over their affairs of the heart, had come to him often enough with their problems; and always he had been able to interpret and advise. Williams, for instance, when he was in love with that married woman in Pawtucket; and Sage, when he was having difficulties with his wife; and poor old Goodman, who only needed to be nerved up to propose to a girl who had waited more than a year for him to do so. All he required now was help of the kind he had so often given. He must eliminate his feelings. He must force himself into a state of frigid practicality. He must audit his affair with Rita as impartially as an accountant would audit his own books. A man of his experience ought to be able to do that.

Riding downtown in the Subway, he attempted it. He had a choice of two courses: Either he must ignore Rita until she should communicate with him, or else he must spare no effort to get in touch with her at once. The arguments in favour of the first course were simple. She had broken her promise to call him up, ignored his messages, failed to acknowledge his flowers. He would like to punish her for all that.

But there were arguments in favour of the other course. Suppose he remained silent—what then?

Rita was proud. She might answer silence with silence. A deadlock. Everything ended. Moreover, a card in a box of flowers was easily lost. And there was absolutely no way of being sure that his message, left with Pierre, had ever reached her.

To discover a plausible excuse for her failure to telephone according to her pledge did not at first look easy, but before he reached his office he had hit upon an explanation which seemed to him a masterpiece of feminine psychologizing. Her promise, given freely as they parted, had assumed an aspect altogether different when the time came for its fulfillment. Twelve hours of daylight had changed the look of things. She had felt self-conscious. Diffidence! That was it! He had a vision of her thinking of him, wishing to telephone to him, yet not wishing to; going hesitantly toward the instrument, then faltering and giving up. A charming vision.

He understood her feeling. He would put away false pride and keep calling her up until he got her. Once they had talked, her shyness would be gone.

At eleven o'clock he left his desk, where an investor was discussing with him the advisability of selling stocks and buying bonds, went to the private telephone booth and called Rita's number. Pierre reported that she was not yet awake. He had expected that. But to-day he meant to be forehanded.

Returning to his desk, he resumed his conversation with the customer—who thought him over-pessi-

mistic—and at half-past twelve he telephoned again. This time the butler asked him to hold the wire. That was encouraging, but the kindling hope was quickly extinguished, for Pierre returned to say that the throat specialist was with mademoiselle;—if Mr. Parrish would leave his number mademoiselle would call him in a little while.

The throat specialist! Perhaps she was ill. Perhaps that was why he had not heard from her. Here was another contingency he should have taken into his calculations. Opera singers had to be more careful of their health than ordinary mortals. But in response to his quick inquiry Pierre assured him that she was quite well; the doctor's visit was a matter of routine.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Parrish.

Yet somehow he was not quite glad to hear it. Of course he did not wish Rita to be ill, but on the other hand, had she been ill everything would have been explained. He left his number, and then, instead of going out, had lunch sent in to him and ate it at his desk. The market to-day was so irregular—the kind of market one did not like to leave.

An hour passed—an hour of suspense, punctuated by frequent excursions to the ticker, but the uncertainties of this fluctuating market were trifles in comparison with those of his state of mind. At length he ceased to make excuses for her. Her promises were worth nothing. She had never intended to call him up.

Well, he would give her one more chance. As he went to the booth for the third time he felt that he was facing one of the crises of his life. The whole future hung on what should happen now. Again he heard the voice of Pierre. He asked to speak to Rita.

"Mademoiselle had to go out, sir."

"All right!"

The electric contact, broken as he lowered the receiver on the hook, would never be resumed. It was over; over and done with. He stood for a moment staring dully at the mouthpiece.

"Damn her!" he muttered. "I'm through!"

CHAPTER X

HE WAS tired—frightfully tired. He needed rest. He needed to relax. But his nerves would not let him relax. The sensible thing for him to do, he knew, was to go home and have a nap before taking Alice to the train, but the thought was distasteful. He was too restless for that.

After the closing of the market he remained for a time in the office, talking gloomily with customers about the economic future of the country, the railroad situation, wages, the excess-profits tax, killing initiative. Had not the British tried an excess-profits tax and abandoned it? But the British generally showed some sense in these matters. A direct sales tax was the only thing.

He looked in his desk drawers for a certain pamphlet giving the comparative figures, but could not find it. The drawers were full of old papers and reports, most of them useless. Talk about efficiency! Sixty dollars a week to a secretary who didn't even clear out these desk drawers! He buzzed for the young man, and in the tone of one who has suffered long and patiently spoke to him about the matter. Then he left for the day.

Instead of taking the Subway up to Forty-second

Street, according to his usual habit, he walked up crowded Nassau Street to City Hall Park, and striking across the park continued up Broadway.

How the city had changed within his memory! Not only the buildings but the people. You never saw any Americans these days. Half the time you didn't even hear the English language. Swarthy foreigners, stopping in the middle of the sidewalks to converse, blocked the way like stupid cattle.

At Union Square he swung round its western border. Why was Union Square always torn up? It never ceased to look like a mining camp. There was something sad, too, about Broadway between Fourteenth and Twenty-third streets. All the old stores gone—some of them moved uptown, some closed forever. He used to like those stores, even in the days when he hadn't much money to spend. And the Fifth Avenue Hotel—one missed it; it had character. The moment anything became a landmark in this town it was time to get rid of it—unless it happened to be something ugly, like the Worth Monument. That, of course, would always be preserved. It hadn't looked so bad in the old days when there were trees round it, but now the trees were gone.

The mild weather of the last few days continued. If you wore your overcoat it was too warm, but if you took it off you felt a chill in the air. There was a lot of pneumonia about. This premature spring was enervating. As soon as everyone was accus-

tomed to it there would come a blizzard. That was, the New York climate.

Reaching the Waldorf he thought of taking a taxi, but after a moment's hesitation continued up Fifth Avenue afoot. He had not intended to walk so far, but as long as he had done it he might as well complete the job, tired though he was. There was just about time enough to walk home and freshen up before calling for Alice. After she had left he would go home and bathe and rest and have some dinner. Or perhaps he would go out to dinner. He could go to a club. He would run into people there. He didn't feel like dining alone. As a matter of fact, he didn't feel like dining at all.

Curious how the looks of the crowds changed from day to day without apparent reason. There ought to be as many pretty, fashionably dressed women out upon the Avenue this afternoon as yesterday or the day before, but there were not. To-day half the women looked dowdy and the other half overdressed. How they piled the make-up on! So many of them had taken to dyeing their hair, too, and every now and then one got a whiff of noxious scent that was asphyxiating.

What a town! More and more crowded every year. Business offices piled in layers, higher and higher; homes piled in the same way—so-called homes. Nobody in New York really had a home. It was all impermanence.

His car was waiting at the curb when he reached

his door, and soon he was on his way across town to Alice's. It would be some time now before he took this drive again, for she would be gone ten days or two weeks.

Now that Rita had been definitely and finally ejected from his life there was not, of course, the pressing need that there had been for Alice's departure. Still, it was just as well that she was going. The experience with Rita had shaken him. Such a splendid dream with such a swift and bitter awakening. It would take him a little while to pull himself together and get over it, and it was better that Alice should be away while he was fighting the thing out with himself.

He found her putting the last touches to her packing. The wardrobe trunk stood in the corner of the bedroom ready to be closed. He pushed the two sides together and snapped the lock. The porters came to get it.

"Let me——" she said, fumbling at her purse, but he tipped them, telling them to put the trunk on a taxi and have it wait with his own car.

Her Russia-leather suitcase was lying open on the bed. He saw her go to her dressing table, take the large silver-framed photograph of himself, wrap it in something soft and silken and place it in the bag.

"Surely you aren't going to lug that out there with you?" he asked.

"I most certainly am!"

"You should have put it in the trunk, then."

"Something might happen to it—they slam trunks around so. Anyway, I want it with me."

"But when you get out to your sister's—you won't want to put my picture up in your room, will you?"

"I'd like to know why not!"

"They'll be asking about it. They'll want to know if it's your young man."

"Well, it *is* my young man, isn't it?"

"Not so very young," he said.

She came and put her arms about his neck, looking up into his face.

"Yes, young!" said she. "You don't look within five years of your age, dear. And you're handsome—so handsome!"

"God forbid!"

"Yes, handsome—the handsomest man I ever saw, if you want to know! Maybe that's the only reason I take your photograph with me. Did that ever occur to you? Maybe I don't love you at all! Maybe it's just that I'm proud of your looks!"

She seemed very sweet at that moment, in her tender playfulness. Somehow, as she stood there close to him he felt happier than he had been in several days. Not really happy, of course;—but there was something soothing about Alice; it helped him to relax.

"They won't ask about your picture," she went on. "They may wonder—I suppose they do wonder sometimes, but that's all."

"Wonder?"

"I mean, I suppose they wonder if I'm ever going

to—that is, what I'm going to do with my life. But they aren't the prying kind. And even if they were, dear, I just couldn't get along without your picture. I love you too much!"

"Too much!" he said. "That's just it. You really haven't had out of life anything like what you're entitled to. I haven't done——"

She placed her hand lightly over his mouth as though to stop the utterance of a sacrilege. They stood thus for a moment, silent.

"It's time to go," he said.

He helped her close the bag and snap the cloth cover over it. Then, when she had put on her hat and coat, he carried the bag to the hall and waited there while she ran to the kitchen to say good-bye to Otilia.

"I told her to telephone to you if anything came up while I'm away," she said when she returned. "That's all right, isn't it?"

"Of course. Come along." He held the door open.

In the limousine he felt her hand descend softly over his upon the seat.

"Are you feeling better to-day, dear?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"Be careful about sudden changes in the weather."

"Certainly."

As they neared the station she said, "I don't know how I'm going to get along without you."

"Oh, it won't be long."

The car had swung into Vanderbilt Avenue and was approaching the carriage entrance of the terminal.

"Do you love me, Dick?"

"You know it."

"Darling!" she said, and pressed his hand gratefully. "And you will try to arrange for us to come back together, won't you?"

"If I can."

Her trunk had followed them down in a taxi; he checked it, then went with her to the train-gate, where an obliging gateman let him pass through with her.

"Dick," she said in a low tone as they walked down the concrete platform beside the long row of Pullmans, "I can't help it. I feel—apprehensive."

"Why should you?"

"I don't know. I woke up last night—you know how weak you are when you wake up in the night and begin to worry? It was a sort of nightmare. Things haven't seemed just right lately. I felt almost as if—as if we had quarrelled. I couldn't get it out of my head that you wanted to get rid of me."

"Silly girl!"

"I suppose I am silly."

"Yes. Why, I had a nightmare myself."

"About me? What did you dream about me?"

"Oh, I don't know. We were on a boat. I can't remember dreams. There was cheese in that salad-dressing last night and cheese never agrees with me."

He boarded the sleeper, saw her to her section, and tipped the redcap who had carried her bag.

"Now," he said with the air of one whose duty is done, "you're all fixed. Here are your tickets."

"Thanks, dear, for seeing to everything. Can't you sit down a minute?"

"I have to get home and freshen up before dinner," he answered. "And—I hate to wait around for a train to leave."

"Yes, I remember." She rose. "I'll go to the platform with you."

He followed her down the aisle and into the narrow passage. At the end of the passage she paused, looked out to the platform to see that no one was coming, then turned quickly and placing her hands upon his shoulders, gave him a swift, eager kiss.

"Not here!" he protested, disengaging himself and glancing apprehensively behind him.

She was amused.

"Don't you like me when I'm brazen?"

"Now you go back," he said, smiling uneasily, "and we'll say good-bye through the window."


He left her, walked back beside the car, and presently saw her sit down on the green plush seat within. Bending over and looking at her through the two thicknesses of glass, he formed a good-bye with his lips, then paused for an instant, feeling her clinging to him with her eyes.

"Good-bye," he said again, and lifted his hat.

This time her lips moved in answer. With a nod and a smile he straightened up and walked away.

Coming upon a newsman some distance back

along the platform he was reminded that he had failed to supply her with anything to read. He hesitated, for he did not wish to go back to her because it would mean saying good-bye all over again. Making a quick selection from the man's supply he pencilled Alice's name and her car and section numbers on the cover of one of the periodicals. Then he stopped an empty-handed redcap who was passing and gave them to him for delivery. It would be a little surprise for her. Trifling attentions always pleased her so.



CHAPTER XI

THE street lamps were lighted on Fifth Avenue as he drove home from the station, and the traffic was much diminished. It was nearly dinner time. How should he pass the evening? The sensible thing to do would be to dine at his apartment, read for a while, and go early to bed. But tired as he was, he dreaded the thought of a quiet evening at home—thinking of Rita!

All day long he had known that the time would come when he would feel as he was feeling now; that he would find himself alone with nothing to do, and that, left thus to himself, he would be miserable; but he had lacked the initiative to plan the evening otherwise. He had thought of various friends and various pastimes, but had rejected them one after another. There was no definite person he really wished to see; there was no definite thing he really wished to do; yet his desire to see someone and to do something was overwhelming. He did not want to plan. He wanted something to happen—something unexpected, extraordinary, stimulating; the kind of thing that never happens when one longs for it.

He wished he were anywhere but where he was. Oh, to be in Paris at this moment, with a seat at a

little table on the sidewalk terrace of some boulevard café; or in a speedy motor boat, dashing along the shores of some tropical isle, blue and silver in the moonlight; or in an aeroplane soaring like a night bird between the stars and the sleeping world! But in all of his imaginings he was conscious of someone at his side, and though he tried to make himself oblivious of the identity of that someone, he could not.

How Rita haunted him!

At home he dawdled miserably over his dressing and it was after eight when he started on foot for the club; and when, a little later, he entered the dining room he saw after-dinner coffee on many of the tables. Four of his friends, Larry Merrick among them, were at a table where there was no room for an extra place. Two more were talking business and evidently wished to be alone. Clarke was dining by himself, as usual, and for the usual reason: nobody wished to dine with such an ass as Clarke.

Parrish sat down alone and looked over the menu. The head waiter came and recommended chicken potpie but Parrish hated chicken potpie. His order given at last, he read his second evening paper. How slow the service was!

But when he was eating his dessert Larry Merrick came over and joined him. "A nice party we had the other night," he said.

Parrish assented briefly; then spoke of a consolidation of steel companies which had been an-

nounced that day, asking Merrick what he thought about it.

"It ought to be a good thing," said the other. "Wasn't it nice to hear her sing in those intimate surroundings? It was just right, the way she modulated her voice for that room."

"Yes. It struck me as peculiar that the steels didn't go up on the news though."

"You can't tell in this market. Have you seen her since?"

Great Lord! Didn't the man know anything else to talk about!

"No, I haven't."

"She seemed quite taken with you."

"Rot!"

"Busini evidently didn't think it was rot." Merrick smiled.

Parrish laid down his fork.

"Waiter," he said, "bring my coffee."

"You think she was simply using you to plague him?"

That possibility had not occurred to Parrish before. "How should I know?" he demanded. "All I know is that Busini is a lunatic."

"Yes. What do you suppose she sees in him?"

"The Lord only knows."

"Yet they've been keen about each other for a long time."

"So I've heard," Parrish answered in a tone intended to dismiss the topic.

"I guess it's pretty straight." Merrick paused, then added ruminatively, "Women are certainly queer!"

"I don't agree with that statement," the other returned crisply. "You can't make sweeping generalizations about either sex any more than you can about nations or political parties or the members of this club. Some men are queer, and some women aren't queer at all. Where can you find a greater freak than Busini, for instance? On the other hand, take a high type of woman—the fine, straightforward, honest, loyal kind that you can tie to as if she were the Rock of Gibraltar. Certainly you wouldn't call a woman like that queer!"

He was thinking of Alice. Her train must be somewhere near Albany by now. She had eaten her dinner and was back in her section reading one of the magazines that he had sent her; or perhaps she was sitting thinking about him. He wished that she had not gone away; that she were back in her apartment, where he could go to her for solace. She would ask no questions. She would demand nothing.

"I was talking about temperamental women," explained Merrick; "the artistic kind."

"Why didn't you say so then?"

"Weren't we discussing Rita?" Merrick looked surprised.

"We were discussing women. When you get down to artistic people there's no use discussing them at

all. Nobody can figure them out. You can't tell what they're going to do any more than you can tell what a bolt of lightning is going to do. And even if you *could* figure them out—what's the use? It's a waste of time. They're like a lot of animals in a zoo. You may like to go and look at them once in a while, but you wouldn't want to live with them, because that would drive you off your base."

The waiter brought his coffee. Parrish tasted it and found it too hot. From his glass he poured some ice water into the cup, then gulped down its contents and rose from the table.

"Talk about generalizations!" said Merrick as they moved together toward the door. "It seems to me you've dealt with artistic people pretty much en bloc. Architects are artistic—aren't they pretty sane?"

"They'll put small windows in a house to make it pretty, whether you get air or not."

"Maybe they will. But there's a big difference between different kinds of artistic people. Of course, poets are the worst. I don't like writers, anyhow! Half of them seem to be socialists or anarchists; they get too much advertising and it swells them up. And painters—they're a little off, too. They think they have to wear beards and soft hats and baggy homespun suits. But music is more universal than the other arts. It reaches everyone and expresses things for them they can't express for themselves, and for that reason it seems to me that musi-

cal people are generally more human than artists of other kinds."

They were at the head of the wide stair leading down from the dining-room floor to the hall below.

"*Musical* people!" repeated Parrish, stopping in his tracks. "Musical people *human*? Why, musical people are the worst of the whole outfit!"

As quickly as he could he escaped from Merrick and from the club, and walking aimlessly to Broadway, strolled down through the glittering, crowded district of theatres, restaurants, little shops and movie palaces. There came into his mind a vague thought of seeing a movie, but the signs in electric lights outside the movie houses repelled him: "The Penalty of Passion"—"The Chains of Love"—"The Golden Sin!" No, no! Besides, it was Saturday night. Everything would be packed to the doors.

By the time he reached Forty-second Street he felt that he had enough of Broadway jostling; so turning off, he cut through to Fifth Avenue and thence made his way homeward.

That night he slept soundly, but he awoke in the morning with a feeling of deep depression. It was Sunday; he had nothing to do; the long, dismal day confronted him. How long must he go on in this miserable frame of mind, with his heart like a lump of lead inside him?

Drinking his coffee at breakfast, with the Sunday papers spread about him, he told himself that he

ought to do something to shake off his despondency. The thing for him to do, whether he felt like it or not, was to pack up and get out of town for a day or two. But where? He knew he would be welcome at the houses of a number of his friends in Westchester County and on Long Island, but he did not want to see people to whom he would have to talk. He did not even want to go to Roslyn and see the Bements, though Stuart Bement was his partner and his closest friend. In almost any other circumstances the Bements would have been the very people he would have wished to visit; but the thought of their placid, happy, wholesome home was repellent to his present mood. He had the feeling that he wished to see people without associating with them.

Why not Atlantic City? He did not like Atlantic City, but that, in this unnatural, bitter humour he was in, seemed almost to recommend the place. If he went anywhere it must be to some place he did not like; not a place he hated, exactly, but one of which he was contemptuous.

He directed Ito to pack for him, then called up the garage. His chauffeur had not yet arrived, but was expected momentarily, and he left word for him to ring up as soon as he should come in. Then he wrote a letter to his secretary saying that he would not be at the office until Tuesday or Wednesday, and telling where he could be reached.

He had not yet heard from his chauffeur when his bags were packed and he was ready to leave for

the train, and he was about to telephone down to the door man to get him a taxi when the telephone rang. But it was not his chauffeur's voice he heard when he answered. It was a woman's voice asking for him, and at the first sound of it his heart suddenly became a thing nervously alive.

"This is Mr. Parrish," he replied, almost but not quite certain of the voice.

"Where have you been all this time?"

His hands holding the instrument began to tremble.

"Where have I been?" he repeated, stupefied even more by the bland audacity of the question than by the astounding fact that this was actually Rita—Rita, to whom he had never, never expected to speak again.

"Yes, where have you been? Why haven't I heard from you?"

"Oh, then you haven't heard from me?" he said with biting irony.

"No. Have you been ill?"

"I don't think so," he answered slowly, ominously.

"You don't think so? Then what's been the matter?"

His anger, rising suddenly, seemed to choke him.

"*You!*" he cried. "*You've* been the matter, since you're so kind as to ask!"

"I?" She gave a little laugh. "How could I be the matter? Why, I haven't even talked to you since the night you were here!"

"No," he returned bitterly, "you haven't, although you promised twice to call me up. But I suppose you've forgotten about that. I suppose little things like promises don't matter much with you! I suppose——"

"Don't you think," she broke in, "that you might have waited to hear what I was going to say?"

"I might have," he retorted, "but I happened to have something to say myself! I'm not accustomed to being kept waiting around for hours to hear from people. I suppose you aren't aware that I've called you up half a dozen times. Or perhaps it's your idea that I've telephoned for the pleasure of talking to your butler!"

"I called up," she answered stiffly, "to thank you for the flowers you sent, and to explain. Evidently, though, you don't care to hear what I have to say."

There was something very final in her voice. Though he did not wish to make things easy for her, he did not wish to lose her altogether; and he felt that unless he quickly changed his attitude she would hang up the receiver.

"I'm afraid," he said in a conciliatory tone, "that I spoke hastily. If I did I'm sorry. But—well, just stop and think what you've put me through! I didn't believe I was ever going to hear from you again. I had made up my mind that I——"

"Well, you didn't sound particularly ecstatic when you did hear from me," she interrupted. "You spoke as if you actually hated me."

"Well, I did." He gave a reminiscent little laugh.

"I'm ever so sorry," she said, now speaking gently. "But you wouldn't have felt that way if you'd only understood. You can't imagine what a horrible week I've had! It's been ghastly—simply ghastly. You don't know how much I've thought about you. I've tried several times to get you on the telephone, too; but your wire would be busy, or there'd be a ring on mine just as I was going to call you, or people would come in and bother me. You can't dream how people bother me! They're at me all the time."

"Of course I know you're busy," he admitted.

"Busy? Oh, my dear! If you hate anybody it ought to be those people down at the opera—for calling extra rehearsals. It's all on account of that frightful woman Bonata. She's a slow study, poor thing. Yesterday she wasted the whole afternoon for us. She knows the music and the business, but she can't coördinate the two. It's maddening to work with her. And the day before, my chauffeur had to go to court and I was without my car and——"

"Why didn't you tell me? You could have had mine."

"You're too kind. Well, anyway, you do forgive me, don't you, now that you understand?"

"Of course," he answered in a tone so generous that it took on a note of tenderness. "I'm only

ashamed of having jumped to conclusions as I did. You'll forgive me for that—Rita?"

"Naturally."

"Say it then. Say, 'I forgive you, Dick.'"

She repeated the words after him. It was sweet to hear his name upon her lips.

"Angel!"

"What are you doing now?"

"Talking to the loveliest creature in the world!"

"What were you doing before? What are you going to do?"

"If you'd called up ten minutes later," said he, "you wouldn't have found me. I was just going away."

"Where?"

"To Atlantic City. That's what you were driving me to."

"Oh," she cried, "that's just where I'd like to go! I'm wild to get out of town. I'll go, too."

It did not cross his mind that she might be in earnest until she added, "That is, if you want me."

"You mean it?"

"Certainly," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Let's motor down. I'll be ready in an hour."

CHAPTER XII

NOT until her travelling bags were in the limousine with his, and she in the seat beside him driving toward the ferry, did Parrish relax to the satisfying certainty that this time he was not to be disappointed. Rita really was going with him to Atlantic City. It was his first opportunity to talk with her under conditions at once secluded and tranquil, and he felt profoundly the momentousness of the occasion. He and Rita were on the threshold of great and beautiful beginnings.

Through the Sunday desolation of lower Manhattan they passed swiftly, and having crossed the bay and Staten Island, threaded their way through the nearer Jersey towns. Beyond Red Bank they swung into the Rumson Road, and presently, at Seabright, reached the coast. Over a vigorous sea, white crested and sparkling in the sun, came a crisp in-shore wind which whistled shrilly at the windows of the car. Save for a solitary tramp steamer, looking small and lonely as it wallowed toward the Narrows under a thinning plume of black smoke, there was no sign of life upon the waters. Surf was breaking savagely upon deserted sands. Bathhouses and summer cottages, their doors and windows boarded

up, showed faces as expressionless as those of blind men. A small automobile approached from the opposite direction and scurried past, as it seemed to Parrish, apologetically. Then the road ahead was empty—an enchanted solitude.

He offered her his cigarette case.

"No, thanks, I don't smoke."

"But the other night——"

"That was only to annoy Luigi."

It did not displease him to know that she had wished to annoy the Italian.

Turning a little in his seat he settled his back into the angle of the cushions so that he could look at her without turning his head, and as he looked he felt anew the impact of her loveliness. He always felt it thus when, having glanced away, he let his eyes return to her. He wished to touch her hand, but was deterred by a curious feeling of strangeness with her.

"Are you happy, Rita?"

She answered with a nod and a little smile.

"Absolutely?" He had a boyish longing to hear her explicit declaration.

"Of course. We couldn't have had a finer day, could we?"

He was obliged to concede the fineness of the day, but he wished her to understand that it was not the weather that was making him happy, so he continued: "That's far from being the best of it though. The best of it is that you and I are really going to

know each other now. This is going to be a day to date time from. Ever since that night at your house I've had a tantalizing sense of knowing you, yet paradoxically not knowing you at all. It's as if I had an unfinished portrait of you—very beautiful, what there is of it, but with the rough canvas showing through in many places. Oh, Rita, how eager I've been to get it completed, background and all!"

"I shall be sitting for you all this afternoon," she answered, giving him a little smile.

"Yes," he cried eagerly, "and to-morrow, and the next day, and on and on, until——"

"Evidently," she put in, "you aren't a very rapid painter."

"I suppose I shall never finish really," he said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you'll be sorry you started."

"Never! I'm only afraid that my sitter may tire."

"She's not tired yet. Is the pose all right?"

In imitation of a portrait painter's studio manner he studied her, cocking his head to one side.

"Let's see—the face a little more this way, if you please—so. And the eyes"—indicating his own eyes—"here."

At the meeting of their eyes he felt an incandescence. They laughed together vaguely and a little shyly. It made him strangely happy to laugh with her like that. Again he felt the desire to touch her hand, and this time he did so. She gave his fingers a swift pressure, then gently drew her hand away.

"You make me feel fantastically young," he told her.

"Why shouldn't you feel young?"

"Because, my dear, I'm not."

"Don't be absurd."

"Guess, then."

After a brief glance of appraisal she said, "You're about thirty-five."

"Thirty-eight," he corrected in a sighing tone.

"Well, that's not old. You may be sure I shan't let myself feel old at thirty-eight."

"Ah," he said mournfully, "when you're that age—I *shall* be old then!"

"No, you won't."

"Oh, yes."

"Do you know my age?"

"Not exactly, but I have a pretty good idea."

"What?"

"Judging by your looks alone," he answered, "I'd call you twenty-five. But I have more than your looks to go by. I heard you sing in Paris the year of your *début*. Say you were twenty or twenty-one then. Add eight years and you have it."

"Twenty-eight's my publicity age," she said gravely, "but I'm really thirty-one. I don't mind letting you know."

Her slight stressing of the penultimate word gave him extraordinary satisfaction. Gazing at her fondly he laughed.

"You're amused that I shade my age?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"It's so unnecessary—and so feminine."

"Of course it's feminine; because age is infinitely more important to a woman than to a man. No one cares what a man's age is, but everyone is curious about a woman's. About a man they say 'Oh, he's somewhere between thirty and forty'; but of a woman they say 'She's thirty-five if she's a day!' Even when she's young and blooming they'll tell you what she's going to look like at forty. 'She's the type that gets fat!' People are always speculating about the ages of women on the stage. When a woman has been before the public ten or fifteen years they begin to feel they've seen her since the world began. It's bad enough when they check up, but it's worse when they don't. If it's ten years they call it fifteen, and if it's fifteen they say 'Why, I heard her all of twenty years ago,' and they speak of her as well preserved. Ugh!" She gave a little shudder. "I don't want to be old."

At that he seized her hand in both of his and promised that she never should be old.

"We'll stay young," he said, "together."

The afternoon's run left in his mind a patchwork of pictures and of memories: Long Branch, Lakewood, Toms River, Barnegat, Absecon; the sea, the pines, the marshes and the sea again; Rita's profile against the window; her gestures; the quick turning of her head; the sudden lighting of her face; the whiteness

of her teeth when she smiled; the grave look in her eyes as she talked about her girlhood.

Of all their conversation that was what he remembered best. He felt almost as if he had seen the narrow gabled cottage in Rochester, standing in its cramped yard, between two other cottages almost exactly like it. There was a front porch, with turned posts and a honeysuckle vine, where the young people used to sit, chattering or singing, on hot summer evenings.

But her father had not, as legend told, been a postman. He had been an accountant. This information, though in itself unimportant, Parrish found gratifying, because it pointed to the unreliability of all rumours concerning Rita. People like to tell exaggerated tales of a woman beautiful and famous. Such stories suited the common craving for dramatic contrast, making a Cinderella of her. As gossip painted Rita's beginnings grayer than they had actually been, so it gilded her later life with passionate adventures set on the private cars and yachts of multimillionaires and kings.

The picture she made for him of her girlhood took its place in a larger picture representing the life of a happy though none too prosperous American family, in which the dressing and educating of three children was a chief concern. It was always a strain to make both ends meet, and neither Rita nor her sister had been able to dress so well as their girl friends.

"When I went out in my best," she said, "it was

always with a haunting feeling that there might be a gap somewhere or that my skirt hung badly."

She was sixteen when the choirmaster in the church she attended thought he detected an unusual voice. He carried her along as far as he was able, then sent her to a local singing teacher, who, after a few years, advised that she go to Proileau, in Paris, to be "finished." For her father to finance such a venture was quite out of the question, but some wealthy parishioners, becoming interested in her, made up a purse and sent her to Paris for a year. A year was not enough to bring out her voice fully, but Proileau believed in her and placed her as prima donna with a third-rate opera company which played through the summer at Trouville, where at his summer home he continued to coach her. Thus she gained her first practical experience and the money for a second year in Paris. In her third year she made her *début* at the Opéra Comique, began to reimburse her benefactors, and bought herself "dresses in which I wasn't nervous every time I got up out of a chair."

He felt that he had made progress with the background of his portrait of her.

CHAPTER XIII

DUSK was advancing over the marshes as Parrish's car traversed the last miles of the broad boulevard by which Atlantic City is approached, and by the time they turned into Atlantic Avenue, daylight had all but abandoned its futile rear-guard action against oncoming night.

Looking down the wide, brightly lighted yet somewhat tawdry shopping street and into the intersecting highways with their close-set rows of cottages, boarding houses, and cheap hotels, Parrish's first impression was that this strange settlement had changed hardly at all in the ten or dozen years that had passed since his last visit. It resembled, he thought, rather a town into which prosperity had gushed with a flood of oil than one established on the fixed flow of the Gulf Stream, the tides, and tripper-laden trains.

Not until they swung round a corner and headed down a short street leading toward the ocean did he perceive that there had been, after all, a kind of progress here; for it was then that he discovered, in its new surroundings, the pleasant old clapboarded hotel, four or five stories high, in which he used to stay.

A decade ago this hotel had been reputed the best in Atlantic City; it still appeared to be kept up, and might, for aught he knew, retain its old-time excellence; but its former look of size and consequence was gone. By contrast with the new flamboyant caravansaries towering on each side of it, facing the Boardwalk and the beach, it seemed to have paled and shrunk until now it made him think of a little old lady standing timid and suppressed between two stalwart modern girls tricked out in all the amazing vulgar fashionableness of the time.

"I used to stop there," he said, looking back a little wistfully as the car drew up under the portecochère of one of the larger hostelrys across the way.

"Yes," said Rita, "it's a nice old place. But this one will amuse you."

The entrance of bronze and glass before which they had stopped was built in the form of a giant spider web; and now, like a pair of ravenous black spiders, there darted out two negro bell boys, who seized upon their luggage. This doorway was bizarre enough, but it was not until next day, when he viewed the building from the Boardwalk, that Parrish fully realized its outward splendours. Architecturally it resembled a mammoth pipe organ of tile and stucco, built after modern Germanic designs, and crowned, as an afterthought, with a job lot of Turkish mosques.

Entering the lobby at Rita's side, he was con-

scious of vast gilded areas above, carried on ranks of massive columns of a material bearing a resemblance to marble, reaching away into distances as splendid as those of a motion-picture Babylon. Around the bases of these columns, and between them, were scattered rugs, couches, chairs, palms, and people, all of opulent appearance.

One of Parrish's bags contained certain precious and illegal bottles. He paused midway across the lobby to warn the bell boy to handle it with care, and, waiting, overheard a snatch of conversation between two large, expensive-looking women whose modishly short skirts revealed the plebeian bowing of their legs.

"Irma's got three hats with different-coloured paradise plumes on," said one. "That red one you was admiring cost two hundred and sixty. She showed me the receipted bill."

To which the other replied in an envious tone, "Manny don't seem to kick, no matter how much she spends."

The dapper clerk knew at once who Rita was.

"We received your wire," he declared with extreme affability as he dipped the pen and handed it to her. "I've been able to hold a very choice suite for you. Our managing director, Mr. Stussmann"—this reverently—"has had his own personal grand piano placed in your parlour with his compliments."

Rita thanked him and wrote, whereupon the young man turned to Parrish, assigning him a suite which,

though it did not face the sea directly, he mentioned urbanely as having a favourable position with regard to the morning sun.

Before going to his own rooms Parrish saw Rita to hers. Her parlour was large and elaborately furnished. French windows opened upon a sheltered balcony overlooking the ocean. On the centre table was a bowl of roses accompanied by the card of Mr. Stussmann, with the word "Compliments" written in a Spencerian hand above the name. Before slipping out of her loose motor coat Rita moved over to Mr. Stussmann's "own personal grand piano," opened the lid, and ran a hand over the keyboard. It was out of tune, but it was a gilded piano.

After seeing to the placing of her bags Parrish departed with his bell boy.

"I'll be ready in an hour," she said, giving him a gay wave of dismissal.

But he did not expect her to be ready in an hour. His experience of her was not such as to encourage hopes of promptness. Moreover, she had not brought her own maid with her.

In leisurely fashion Parrish unpacked and made ready for dinner; then, as the hour was up, he took the small bag about which he had cautioned the bell boy, walked down the corridor, and knocked at Rita's door.

"Come."

She was moving toward him as he entered. Her henna-coloured evening gown was of some diaph-

anous material that fluttered as she crossed the room. It was draped with infinite art, and it seemed to him to fit with a kind of haughtiness. He fancied it as being proud of its lines and its fabric, as a beautiful woman is proud of her figure and the texture of her skin. The stockings and the little satin slippers, being of the colour of the dress, gave a characteristic look of completeness; always there was that look about her; yet Parrish felt instinctively that this completeness was achieved without much effort or indeed much thought on Rita's part, but represented rather the unhampered art of costly experts.

"I didn't think you'd be ready," he said, praising her appearance with his eyes.

"I said an hour."

"Yes, but——" He was thinking of the times that she had disappointed him; but instead of speaking the thought, shifted to a mention of the absence of her maid.

"Oh," she answered, "that's easy. I've bought up one of the hotel maids."

Parrish laid his bag carefully upon the table by the bowl of roses, opened it, produced bottles and a shaker, and having secured ice, orange juice, and glasses, made cocktails.

"I have plenty of appetite without this," said Rita, sipping.

He was glad that she was hungry. After the manner of his kind, he prided himself upon a certain skill in ordering, and as to-night he was for the first

time to exercise that skill for Rita, he had given preliminary consideration to the meal.

First they would have Lynnhaven Bay oysters—real Lynnhaven Bays; then green-turtle soup, provided the green turtle was fresh—he would inquire about that; then a filet of flounder—call it sole if you like—with Marguery's immortal sauce: he was sure that Rita would appreciate that touch; then a broiled live lobster with drawn butter, to be followed by a salad chiffonade. Sweets, he felt, might be dispensed with. Crackers and cheese—Roquefort or port du salut—would be more suitable. Then coffee.

The elevator was half full when they got in. He saw a woman nudge the man with her, calling his attention to Rita, and the two stared at her with unblinking eyes during the descent to the main floor. Clearly they recognized her. Clearly many people did. Walking with her through the lobby and down the corridor he thought he could tell by the faces of those he saw looking at her whether they knew who she was, or saw in her only a woman to be admired. One man stopped and stood at gaze, inspecting her as a gourmand might an appetizing dish being served at another's table. He was a coarse-looking creature and Parrish would have liked to kick him. Rita, however, appeared oblivious of ocular intrusions; she walked among strangers as she might have among trees in a forest.

At the door of the café they were met by the head waiter, who led them through the crowded room to

a table bearing a card marked "Reserved," and drew out their chairs with an extra flourish.

"I have had the honour to serve madame at the Carlton in London," he declared as he seated Rita; and it was over her, not Parrish, that he leaned to discuss the dinner.

This was a novelty to Parrish, who was thoroughly accustomed to receive attention from head waiters. He had realized, of course, that to escort Rita would be a different matter from escorting a woman in private life, but he had not foreseen how great the difference would be. Interrupting the culinary conference across the way, he began to outline to her the dinner he had contemplated, but before he could finish she broke in.

"I know just what I want. I want a porterhouse steak—medium—about three inches thick." As she spoke she glanced up at the head waiter, measuring with her hands in exaggerated illustration. "And some hashed brown potatoes, and soup—cream of tomato—to play with while the steak is cooking."

"Bien, madame." The man made swift notes on his pad and came around the table.

"Monsieur wishes Lynnhaven Bays?" he asked, his pencil poised to write.

Parrish hesitated, but only for the briefest moment. Then he duplicated Rita's order.

"Oh, but you mustn't let my vulgar appetite spoil your dinner!" she protested.

He assured her that the things she had ordered were the very things he wanted; nor was the statement altogether false. Steak and hashed brown potatoes ordered in this place by so complete a cosmopolitan as Rita constituted not a barbarity but a gastronomic playfulness in which he wished to join, precisely as he would have wished to join in any other playfulness of hers.

The orchestra, which had been finishing a trivial tune as they came in, presently began again to play, but this time it was *Un bel di vedremo*, from "Madame Butterfly."

"They've found me out," Rita told him with a sigh.

That plainly was the case. The violinist who led the orchestra kept his sad, luminous eyes fixed upon her as he played, and this directed to her the attention of those among the diners who had not already noticed her. It was to her rather than to the musicians that people looked as they applauded at the termination of the aria, and to her that the violinist bowed in acknowledging the unusual demonstration.

"They're pretty sure to keep this up until we leave," she said. "It's rather awful to be stared at when you're eating, isn't it? I've always thought the animals in the zoo must hate it."

"I could speak to the orchestra leader," Parrish suggested. But Rita demurred.

"Oh, no! It's intended as a compliment, and I'm desperately sorry for a good musician who has to play

in a place like this. Probably this man used to dream of becoming a Kreisler or a Heifetz. The chorus of the opera is full of people like that—people who have dreamed and been disappointed. There's so much luck about it, too. Many's the time I've looked at some woman in our chorus and thought what John Bunyan thought when he saw the man going to be executed."

Over the soup they fell to discussing differences between the careers of artists and those in other walks of life.

"The failure of an artist," said Rita, "seems to me doubly tragic because the artist is not out only for a living. Being poor isn't the worst of it for him. He's in love. If his art jilts him it breaks his heart, for of course there's no love greater than that of the artist for his art."

"Oh, I don't believe that," he put in quickly, jealous of her music.

"Don't you?" She inspected him with quizzical eyes. "Well, it's true. Other loves come and go, but the love for an art never changes. If anything, I stated it too moderately. I might have said there isn't any love so great."

He shook his head, but did not reply. He was thinking that what she had said meant, after all, only that she had never known a love beyond her love for music—not yet. Certainly that was nothing for him to deplore.

Her prevision concerning the musical programme

proved accurate. *Depuis le jour*, from "Louise," became the entrance music for their steak, and was followed by melodies from "Tosca" and "La Bohême," while their coffee was drunk to the air of *Près des Ramparts de Seville*. After each number there was the same applause, the same bowing of the violinist to Rita, the same concentrating of eyes upon her.

When, having lost no time over the simple meal, she rose to leave, people at near-by tables stopped talking and gazed up into her face, and as she moved toward the door, Parrish, walking behind her, saw that the whole room turned its head. The violinist stood and made her a profound obeisance as she passed the musicians' platform; at the portal the head waiter paid her like homage, and as she emerged to the foyer the maid from the ladies' cloakroom hastened forward with her wrap.

But no one came running forward with Parrish's hat and coat. The olive-skinned attendant at the men's coat room stood entranced, gazing at Rita; Parrish had to speak to him crisply before the trance was broken. Had Rita been a queen, he thought to himself, she could hardly have received more attention; then with a little inward smile he added the reflection that had he been a prince consort he could hardly have received less.

"If I should ever be a fugitive from justice," he said to her as they made their way toward the exit leading to the Boardwalk, "I should know exactly

what to do. Instead of hiding on some obscure island where they live on pineapples, bananas, and rum highballs, I should conceal myself by going everywhere with you."

But, as he was to learn later, that form of self-concealment was not so effectual as he had supposed. Some eyes, there were, alert enough to encompass both Rita and her escort. By one such pair of eyes—a not too friendly pair—he had been recognized.

CHAPTER XIV

EMERGING from a revolving door and passing by a wheel-chair stand, they moved up the Boardwalk in the direction of the Inlet.

The night was dark. The moon had not yet risen, and though there were stars overhead they were dimmed by the Boardwalk lamps. Below them the beach was a gray mystery fading away to a blackness within which, as an awakened sleeper may feel the presence of a silent moving something in his room, they felt the presence of the sea.

A mild salt breeze blew toward them. Ahead the heart of the Boardwalk was marked by an electric brilliance against which wheel-chairs and promenaders were revealed in shifting silhouette. Nor was the brilliance to be seen only along that way of pleasure with its rows of clustered lamps and its bright shop fronts; by a ladder of illuminated windows it mounted to where, above the hotel roofs, the sky was restlessly alive with the changeful dotted glitter of great advertising signs.

As Rita took his arm and stepped out beside him he was struck by the fact that she did not amble after the fashion of most women, but strode with a fine swinging gait, making necessary but a slight

abridgment of his own normal step. It was like an expression of her spirit, that free, elastic tread.

He leaned forward a little and looked down at her slippers swiftly appearing and disappearing below the hem of her cloak—satin trifles, frail and exquisite, with soles wafer thin and heels of a voluptuous violinlike curvature.

"I suppose," he said wonderingly, "that those slippers are fully as durable as morning-glories."

"Oh, they're stronger than they look."

"They must be."

For a time he was silent, his mind taken up with the miracle of woman's dress, which is to man the most baffling thing about her. For man feels that even supposing he could walk in slippers such as hers they would be ruined in the distance of a block or two, while as for her gowns—made seemingly from wisps of rainbow, sunset, and the Milky Way—he knows that such things, worn by him, would not endure an hour.

His ruminations on this theme were interrupted when she drew him over to a lighted show-window containing dainty bits of feminine equipment at which she wished to look.

As they moved on again he shifted the position of his arm, bracing it behind hers so that her elbow found a cradle in the crook of his, her wrist resting in his hand. Holding her thus firmly he was more than ever conscious of moving with her in delightful unison.

They wandered out upon a pier and back again; then, having resumed their way along the Boardwalk, were attracted by sounds of snapping rifles and clanging target gongs to a shooting gallery, where they stood for a time looking on. The shooting gallery fascinated Rita; presently she announced a wish to try her marksmanship; and when, after a little coaching, her bullets began to break clay pipes, ring gongs, and knock over moving models of animals, she became enthusiastic as a child, and challenged Parrish to a match.

"The loser to give the winner a prize," he specified.

"All right. What shall it be?"

"That's for the loser to decide."

It was his purpose to allow himself to be defeated and to make his vanquishment an excuse for giving her a present. He had been wishing to give her a present. What it should be he had not determined beyond the fact that it should be something exquisite and precious; something worthy of her and of his feeling for her; a piece of jewellery, doubtless; perhaps a linked bracelet of platinum and diamonds such as he had thought of giving Alice for her birthday, except that for Rita the diamonds must be larger to bear comparison with her other jewels. Not that he had the least thought of overlooking Alice's birthday. Of course he would get her something: something nice, though less expensive than a diamond bracelet. He simply could not afford two.

Rita having emptied the magazine of her rifle and made a not discreditable score, Parrish began to shoot.

"I must miss about every other shot," he said to himself, and he commenced by doing so. Then it struck him that Rita might notice the even balance between the hits and misses; wherefore he began to vary his programme, with the result that he lost count of his score. He found it, moreover, curiously difficult deliberately to take false aim. Two or three times he said to himself, "I must miss this one," yet when he fired he would not miss. The targets drew his rifle barrel as the magnetic pole a needle. It was easy enough to miss if you didn't want to, but it was not easy to do it by intent. Trying to miss was like trying to lose at cards; to bring oneself to do it—in a competition, and against a woman who had never held a gun before—was absurdly difficult, yet Parrish, as he fired his last shot, believed that he had thrown the match to Rita.

"Well, you win," he said, laying down the little rifle.

"Why, no!"

"Certainly you do!"

The attendant set him right.

"You trimmed the lady by one hit," said he.

Parrish was surprised. However, it didn't matter; really he needed no excuse for giving her the bracelet.

"You shot well for a beginner," he said as they proceeded up the Boardwalk.

"I'm glad you think so. It's lots of fun. Now you shall have your prize."

Like a child at a party he was wondering what the prize would be.

"Now?"

"Yes. We'll go in here." She was heading him up a short connecting walk leading to the door of a hotel grillroom.

"For the prize?"

"Yes. The prize is an ice."

He was a little disappointed. Not that he desired a handsome gift from her—had she proposed such a thing he would have protested, and sincerely—but he wished that she had thought of something more personal and less trivial; something he could keep.

This grillroom was one of the gayest dancing places on the Boardwalk. The half-dozen negroes who supplied the music were not playing when he and Rita entered, and the vacant central space with its surrounding banks of tables made Parrish think of the sandy bed of some drought-stricken stream. Then the drum rolled and there came a burst of jazz music, whereupon the empty space was inundated, becoming a whirlpool on whose surface dancing figures drifted round and round, bobbing, swaying, spinning this way and that, like flotsam at the mercy of capricious currents.

"Aren't you going to ask me to dance?" she presently demanded.

The proposal came as a mild shock to Parrish.

In his twenties he had enjoyed dancing, and though his interest in it had diminished with his advance into the thirties, he had remained a "dancing man" until, more than a year ago, at the time of Clara Proctor's protracted visit to Alice, in New York, he had found it expedient to renounce the pastime.

In this renunciation Clara had been the determining factor, for there had come to the apartment in her train a following of sleek-haired, facile-footed youths whose entire thought and talk was of dancing places, orchestras, tunes, and steps; and though Parrish had, on Alice's account, tried at first to make himself agreeable to Clara and these friends of hers, taking the two girls and the young men on several nocturnal jaunts to realms of jazz, he had soon perceived that Clara and the youths—her troupe of trained seals, she called them—regarded him as nothing more than a convenience: someone to provide liquor and a limousine and settle restaurant checks. Neither for Alice nor for him did they show the least consideration; once they became ensconced in some noisy, half-disreputable dancing place, they were never ready to go home. He did not care for Broadway night life and knew that Alice liked it not at all; each time he took them out he saw her growing fatigued with the din as the night wore on, and himself tired and bored, would finally suggest that it was time to go; but only to be overruled by Clara and the youths, who under the combined spell of jazz and highballs seemed to contract a mild hys-

teria, a dancing frenzy which possessed them like some demon that only the light of dawn could exorcise.

After several of these unsatisfactory experiments Parrish ceased to invite them out. But they continued to go, and Clara, who did not wish to be the only woman in the party, was constantly tugging at Alice, endeavouring to persuade her to accompany them. This put Alice between two fires: she did not wish to go, and knew that he did not wish her to, yet sometimes she felt in duty bound to accompany her visitor.

It was when he perceived Clara's persistent selfishness that Parrish put his foot down. Partly to protect Alice from further imposition, partly to protect himself from the continual intrusions of Clara and the youths when he and Alice wished to be alone, he declared his purpose of giving up dancing altogether and asked Alice to join him in so doing. Of course she agreed; she always did as he asked her to. From that day to this he had not danced; and that fact—of course without the details—was his excuse to Rita now.

"I haven't danced for a long time," he told her.

"Oh, never mind. Come on."

She had already risen and there was nothing else for it. Reluctantly he accompanied her to the floor. Then all at once reluctance turned into delight; the flow of music caught and carried them away as easily as if they were adrift on a swift stream in a

canoe. He might have known that it would be like this!

"And you didn't want to!" said she in light reproach.

She was all music. Her speaking voice, rich and mellifluous, was like her tread in walking, while her dancing—ah, it was like a song expressed in motion.

"I want to close my eyes," he said.

"Do, then. I'll guide."

He let his lids fall, and in that artificial darkness, surcharged with melody and movement, experienced an exquisite sensation as of soaring with her in a perfect oneness through a vast sweet night.

"Now," he murmured, "we are far up among the stars. How huge the heavens are! We must hold to each other, Rita, or we may get lost."

His eyes, opening, encountered hers. Not since the night of their first meeting had he looked into them at this close range; and now, as then, he gazed like one who seeks to penetrate the depths of some unfathomable sea.

"Are you sorry we danced?" she asked with the shadow of a smile as the music died away.

She knew he was not sorry, and he told her so as they moved toward their table.

"And yet," he added, "I don't want to dance again—not now; perhaps never again. I want to keep this memory."

She nodded, then suggested, "Shall we go?"

"Yes, if you'd just as soon. Let's go out and look up at those stars we were among a little while ago."

But when they first emerged from that brightly lighted place they could not see the stars. Above the glitter of the Boardwalk lamps the sky looked black. Not until they had walked halfway to their hotel, accustoming their eyes to this lesser brilliance, could they discern dim pinpoints of light overhead.

"Let's go out on the balcony," he said when they reached Rita's sitting room; and as obediently she opened the French windows he switched off the lights.

How different now the aspect of the heavens! Half the universe seemed to be spread out before them: the great dome, star-dusted, overhead; and below, stretching away to a mysterious horizon, a sea of blackness on which white lines of surf continually formed and faded.

"It's our world," he said when they had stood for a time by the railing looking out at the stupendous spectacle. "It's all ours. No one else can look at it without permission from us. We'll issue a few tickets; but only to a select group, and they mustn't stand where we can see them; and of course they must be lovers."

"Yes."

His arm stole around her. He leaned and let his cheek touch hers. How cool and sweet it was; how soft her hair against his brow! His arm about her

trembled. He turned her toward him, closed his eyes, and with that power of divination that comes in the dark to lovers, found her lips.

One of her hands was resting on the sleeve of his overcoat, and now he could feel it creeping upward slowly like some little animal seeking a nesting place—along the collar of his coat and so around his neck.

"Tell me you love me, Rita!"

She moved her head as though in acquiescence.

"But tell me! Say it!"

She drew away a little.

"I love you," she said. "That is——" And there she stopped.

"A lot?"

She did not answer instantly; she seemed to be questioning herself; then, "Yes," she replied, "I think a lot."

"But if you love me a lot," he asked her, "why did you want to qualify at all?"

"Only because these things—if I shouldn't love you always so much as you wish me to—if it should end—why, then I——"

He did not hear her out.

"But it's not going to end!" he cried savagely, drawing her close to him again. "It's going to grow! It's going to be the big consuming thing in both our lives! You'll see! You'll see!"

CHAPTER XV

HE WAS already thinking of Rita when early next morning he awoke. Sunlight was streaming into his open windows with the fresh salt air. His sleep had miraculously refreshed him. He leaped out of bed like a happy boy, and sang to the accompaniment of his running bath water and the metrical click of his razor on the strop.

Few people were in the dining room at that early hour, and when, having breakfasted, he passed out to the Boardwalk he was astonished at its emptiness. It was like Wall Street on a Sunday, he reflected; and it occurred to him that there was something as startling in the spectacle of emptiness where usually there is a crowd, as in the spectacle of crowds in places usually deserted.

As for a moment he leaned upon the iron railing, drawing deep breaths of mild, invigorating air and watching the surf break on the golden sand, it seemed to him that he had never smelled a breeze so sweet or seen a sun so brilliant. What a pity, he thought, as he walked briskly off, that everyone was not out to enjoy the morning. What a pity that Rita was not up to walk with him. But she had told him that eleven was her hour for rising.

By half-past ten he was back at the hotel, waiting in his room, and promptly at eleven he telephoned to her. His good morning had the sound of a caress.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Splendidly. And you?"

He told of his early start, his walk, the glory of the day.

"You never saw such a morning. You must hurry and get out."

"But you won't want to walk any more, will you?"

"Just try me! When will you be ready?"

"I'll hurry all I can."

"Let me come and sit while you have breakfast."

"I've had my breakfast."

"Then let me wait in your parlour while you're getting ready."

"The piano tuner's there."

"Oh." He wanted so much to see her. It was hard to wait.

"I'll meet you in the lobby in an hour," she told him.

This morning, however, she was not punctual. Five minutes—ten minutes—fifteen minutes past the appointed time he sat watching the elevators. There began to return to him dimly, like memories of a nightmare, recollections of other times when he had waited for her thus—in vain. Matters were, however, on a different footing now; there would be no more of that miserable uncertainty; this was the merest little tardiness.

Still—what was keeping her? She ought surely to be down by now. He would go to his room and ring her up again. He ascended, and alighting from the elevator moved down the corridor; but instead of stopping at his own door, as he had intended to, he continued until he came to hers. As he drew near he heard the muffled sound of a piano, and he was raising his hand to knock when he realized that the music was coming from within.

Ah, that, then, was the cause of the delay! Naturally. The piano tuner having completed his work, Rita was trying out the instrument and, artist-like, had lost account of time.


Without knocking he paused. Save on the night of her dinner party in New York, when she had accompanied herself in "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes," he had never heard her play, and he was astounded now by the brilliance of her virtuosity.

The composition she was playing was not familiar to him. It was a strange air, full of curious melancholy cadences. He stood motionless, listening, until the last notes had been struck. Then he knocked.

"Why didn't you let me know that you were playing?" he said to Rita when she opened the door. "I should have loved to sit and listen."

As he took a step toward her she drew back quickly, raising her hand in warning.

A young man was seated upon the piano bench.



His back was turned and he did not look around, but it was unmistakably a young back, and there was something youthful, too, in the look of the brown curly hair, thick and short cropped, which stood upon the head like sculptured hair upon a Greek statue.

"Oh!" said Parrish vaguely, looking at the back.

"It was Mr.—ah——" Rita paused, giving the stranger time to announce his name; then, as he neither spoke nor turned his head, but did a light swift run with his left hand, she raised her voice slightly to indicate to him that he was being spoken to, saying, "I don't think you told me your name?"

At that the other pivoted slowly.

"Delaney," he said, looking up at her.

"This is Mr. Parrish, Mr. Delaney."

The young man seemed to see Parrish now for the first time. He gave him a nod, making simultaneously a slight throaty sound which the older man interpreted as meaning, "How are you?"

"How do you do?" said Parrish, advancing and holding out his hand. Meanwhile, he was thinking, "He doesn't mean to be rude; he's shy and awkward."

Thus cornered, Mr. Delaney got up from the piano bench and shook hands, hastily, as one who would fain get something over with. Though his hand was not large it was square and strong; there was a nervous quality in the grip it gave, and in its quick escape; Parrish felt as if his hand had been dropped.

The young man's glance was like his handshake. The light-blue eyes, large, intelligent, and slightly prominent, held a vague expression as they encountered Parrish's, and they dropped quickly, seeming first to study the other's scarf and then his watch-chain.

If Mr. Delaney's manner was unusual, so was his physiognomy. His was not one of those faces that fall conveniently under some everyday classification; Parrish had never known any one who looked in the least like him, yet he was perplexed by a paradoxical feeling that the face was familiar. It was a Celtic face, although the strongly modelled features had the kind of regularity we associate with the art of classic Greece—a fact rendered the more striking by the sculptured hair growing well down upon the forehead. Suddenly Parrish knew why the face had seemed familiar. Mr. Delaney was a prototype of the Hermes of Praxiteles—a slenderer Hermes in a shoddy suit of twentieth-century clothing. Of course! Why, he even had the soft cheek of Hermes and the look of immortal youth, albeit Parrish judged his age to be twenty-five or twenty-six.

Now, wishing to put the other at his ease, the older man spoke cordially.

"That was a lovely thing you were playing," he said. "I waited outside the door. What was it?"

Delaney thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets, bent his head forward as though studying his feet, and took a few steps down the room.

"You wouldn't know it," he declared. "It's part of a concerto."

"His own," Rita put in quickly.

"You don't say!"

The youth had turned and was now by the piano again.

"Play it over, won't you?" she said.

He glanced at her quickly, shaking his head, then looked down at his shoes again.

"No. I told you I hadn't worked it out."

"Why, yes, you have. Certainly that andantino movement is——"

"Not andantino—adagietto," he corrected.

Rita smiled.

"There's very little difference," she replied.

"I beg your pardon," returned Mr. Delaney, showing the faintest shadow of a frown and raising his voice to a slightly higher tenor note, "but there is *every* difference. There is exactly the same difference as between andante and adagio."

Parrish looked expectantly at Rita, but she only answered, "Perhaps you're right."

"Certainly I am right. Otherwise, why the term?" Then, as she failed to reply, but stood gazing curiously at him, he said, "Let me show you—in this song," and slipping down to the piano bench again, began to play.

Rita followed him to the piano and stood behind him, watching his hands closely.

"Here," he said; "when I play it this way it's

andantino; but if I do it like this, then it's adagietto." He looked around at her. "You see?"

She dismissed the elucidation with a little nod, asking:

"Is that yours, too?"

"Yes."

"Unpublished?"

"Yes. I've had nothing published."

"It's a folk song, isn't it?"

"An arrangement of 'Bonnie Doon,'" said he. "The familiar arrangement always irritated me. It's such a silly jig-tune."

To Parrish "Bonnie Doon" was one of several folk songs that were sacred. He remembered his mother's singing it, long ago, at the old square piano, and did not like to hear it spoken of with disrespect. Moreover, he was revising his first impression of Mr. Delaney.


"Silly jig-tune?" he repeated in a tone slightly hostile.

"Exactly," replied the other. "It's all chopped up." Then, lifting his light voice in song he cruelly burlesqued the ancient arrangement:

"Ye banks and braes o' bob-bonn-nie Doo-boon,
How caa-hann ye bloo-hoom sae fre-hesh and fair——"

"You see?" he said over his shoulder. "The music doesn't fit the words at all."

"For a good many years," Parrish remarked dryly, "people have been under an impression that they fitted."



"Well, they don't," said the other. "That's only one of many queer impressions people have. They're full of 'em. Most people think that air was written for 'Bonnie Doon,' but it wasn't. Not any more than my suit was made for you. It was written for an entirely different song."

"Nevertheless," pursued Parrish, "I contend that there is a delightful quaintness about it."

"Oh," said the other, "if you're talking of quaintness——" He gave a shrug. "I'm talking about the fitting of music to words."

"Play your arrangement again," Rita put in quickly.

Delaney did so.

"Really," she exclaimed when he had finished, "it's lovely." She looked at Parrish, asking, "Isn't it?"

"Why, yes," he said; "but——"

"And you mean to say," she went on, "that you haven't published any of these charming things of yours?"

"I've sent them around," said he.

"And nobody would take them?"

"Nobody except one fly-by-night firm that wanted me to pay to have them published." He smiled up at her.

"They *will* take them!" Rita cried.

"Maybe—some day," he returned coolly, still smiling up at her, while his hands fluttered over the keyboard in a light improvisation. "Some day after I'm dead, I guess."

The idea seemed genuinely to amuse him, as if it were a jest, not at his own expense, but at the expense of music publishers. His smile was infectious; his face lighted with it, his eyes looked roguish, dimples appeared in his cheeks, and his lips, drawn back, revealed two rows of hard white teeth. Though the young man had incensed him, and though the smile was not for him, Parrish found himself almost betrayed into an answering smile. He checked the impulse. Rita, however, burst into a laugh.

"If you're planning to die before they publish your arrangement of 'Bonnie Doon,'" she said, "you'll have to hurry up."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because it's going to be published at once!"

Unmoved, he demanded again, "What makes you think so?"

"I'm going to tell them to—that's why!"

"And you think that when you tell them to——"

"Right off!" she answered, amused. Plainly she was delighted with the situation.

"You just give me the manuscript of that song," she went on, "and two or three other things. I'll take them with me. I'll have contracts drawn. My lawyer will——"

"There isn't any manuscript. I've never written it."

"Heavens! Make one, then."

"All right. I suppose I could do it to-night."

"Not to-night—now."

"I haven't any ruled paper."

Again she laughed.

"Oh," she said, "I'll rule the paper for you."

"But my job—I've got four more pianos to tune to-day."

"Your job!" she repeated scornfully. "Why, it's ridiculous, with your gift—tuning pianos! It's a crime!" In her excitement she took him by the shoulder and shook him gently for emphasis. "Don't you ever tune another—do you hear!"

"That's all very well," he answered, "but I have a family to look after. I have to get a certain amount of money every week."

"Oh," she said, showing mild surprise, "you're married? Children?"

"No! Married? I should say not! It's my mother and sister."

"You don't look married," she said. Then dismissing the subject, "Well, anyway, you're coming to New York right off, and I'm going to——"

"I can't afford to go to New York."

"You can't afford *not* to! Don't you understand there's going to be business with music publishers for you to attend to?" As if at the vision of his attending to business she laughed again.

"You don't seem to get it through your head," he declared doggedly, "that I have my living to make. It's a matter of dollars and cents."

He was playing his arrangement of "Bonnie Doon" again, pianissimo.

"Oh," she cried impatiently, "forget those dollars and cents for a minute, won't you?"

"I can't."

"But that part is easy!" There was a note of triumph in her voice. "The point is that I'm going to sing your songs in concert. Do you see? I'll sing your 'Bonnie Doon' at a benefit next week. You'll accompany me, and when——"

"Not in E major," he interrupted. Hastily he transposed the song a half tone lower. "E flat is better for you."

"No, it isn't! Why is it?"

There was a sudden crispness in her voice, which Parrish thought boded ill for the young man. But Mr. Delaney was apparently unconscious of the menace.

"Oh, yes," he insisted in a matter-of-fact tone, "that song in E major would bring out all the worst notes in your upper register." As he spoke he thumped heavily upon three successive keys.

Parrish saw Rita clench her fist. There was a moment during which she stared speechless at the youthful back in its wretched belted coat. But though the lightning played for an instant in her eyes it did not strike. When she spoke her tone was calm.

"Oh, you've heard me, then?"

"A dozen times. I worked in New York all last winter. You're wonderful in 'Louise.'"

The little laugh she gave seemed to originate in the region of her solar plexus.

"Meaning, I suppose, that I'm not much good in my other rôles?"

At that he turned around and looked at her earnestly.

"Oh, I don't mean that at all! I meant musically. Histrionically, of course, nobody can touch you. Except perhaps in 'Butterfly.'"

Rita grinned.

"Thank you," she said, "for these very few kind words."

The other stared at her, puzzled. A flush like that of a rosy baby spread over his face. He rose, protesting.

"Oh," he blurted, "I didn't mean to—I—I didn't mean——"

"Never mind what you meant," said Rita, shaking her head hopelessly. Then moving toward the desk, she ordered, "Come over here and write that music."

Parrish, who had been standing by the French windows leading to the now sunlit balcony, turned quickly.

"Look here," he said to her, "I—if we're not going to get that walk—if you're going to write this music—there's no use in my hanging around any longer. I'll just—ah——" Without finishing, he moved definitely toward the door.

Leaving Delaney at the desk Rita crossed and laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low tone, "but—you

see?" With an expressive jerk of the head she indicated the musician, who was already writing busily. "He won't be long. Let's lunch at half-past one—up here. We'll have our walk afterwards."

"All right," he said. But even before she pressed his arm and showed him the smile, he was feeling that "all right" was not enough.

"That will be fine," he added.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN, after a second walk, Parrish ascended again to Rita's sitting room he found Mr. Delaney all but ready to depart. The young man glanced at him quickly as Rita let him in, then took up his overcoat and made haste to put it on.

"Let me help you," said Parrish with politeness. Stepping behind the young man he lifted at the collar of the overcoat. But the garment did not slip on easily.

"Wait a minute," said the other after a moment's struggle. "This sleeve lining is torn."

He withdrew his arm from one sleeve, then carefully reinserted it and manœuvred it through. Having donned the coat he turned up the collar as if that were the natural way to wear it; then drawing a checked cloth cap from a pocket with one hand, he reached down with the other and took from the floor a small tan satchel, which, though stamped in imitation of alligator skin, was plainly made of cardboard. A muffled clink of tools came from within the bag as he lifted it.

"Then it's all settled," said Rita, offering her hand.

"Yes."

He snatched the hand, shook it quickly, dropped it, and made for the open door, putting on his cap as he went.

"Don't lose the address," she called after him.

With one hand upon the outer door knob Delaney paused and turned in the aperture.

"I've got it safe," he assured her, but finding himself thus arrested he seemed to have some difficulty in going on again.

"Well, then——" he said in the tentative tone of one about to depart; but he still stood there.

"Au revoir," called Rita, with a characteristically gay wave.

That seemed to supply the impetus the young man sought; and with a quick smile and a jerky little nod he drew the door shut after him. No sooner had it closed than there came from the hall without a dull crash as of falling dishes. Then voices. The two looked at each other.

"I'm afraid," said Rita slowly—"I'm afraid he must have run into the waiter—with our luncheon."

"Of course," said Parrish with cynical indifference, "that's precisely what he *would* do." And he took a few steps away from the door as if to indicate his disassociation from any disaster in which Mr. Delaney might have become involved.

"I'll go and see," said Rita, and stepped rapidly toward the door.

"Hold on!" he cried, turning sharply. "Don't!"

She stopped.

"Why not?"

"He'll come back again!"

"No, he won't; and, anyway, if it's his fault he can't afford to pay for it."

Parrish gave in.

"All right," he said, moving toward the door.

"You stay here. I'll go out and see to it."

Two or three minutes later he came back.

"Yes, it was our lunch," he said in a fatigued tone.

"I fixed the waiter. He's gone down to duplicate the order, and now that Delaney's gone we may *get* it."

Rita laughed.

"Don't you like him?" she asked mischievously.

"The young whelp!" he burst out. "Why, the way he talked to you—talked *down* to you! A piano tuner! It was the worst piece of impudence I ever heard in my life!" He paced the floor. "I couldn't believe my ears! I wanted to kick him! One thing after another! I kept saying to myself, 'This is a little *too* much! Now she's going to nail him!' But you didn't. You just took it. Offering to help him, too, after what he'd said!" He stopped and stood staring at her. "Think of it!" he went on. "You tell him you'll sing some rotten little song of his—some song he had to write because 'Bonnie Doon' isn't *good* enough for him—the same as telling him you'll *make* him—and what does he say? Does he say thank you? No! He tells you you can't sing!"

"Oh, hardly that!"

"Practically that. Telling you what keys you can't sing in! Telling you you've got a lot of bad notes in your upper register! Yes, and thumping them! *Thumping* them! Rita, I can't see why you stood for it. I can't get it through my head."

She smiled.

"He was a dog to do it," she told him, "but it's true."

"No, it isn't! And if it were, that would only make it worse. Tell me—just to satisfy my curiosity—how did you ever come to let him get away with it?"

She looked thoughtful.

"Well," she said, "in the first place he's gifted; he really knows. And being gifted, he's queer; one makes allowances. And there's something horribly pathetic about him, so poor and so talented and——"

"So rude," he put in.

"Yes, but he's young. He must be very young. How old do you suppose he is?"

"Old enough to know better," he answered dourly. And he added, "Those pretty men always look younger than they really are."

"Yes," she agreed reflectively, "he is good-looking."

"Too good-looking!" Parrish mumbled as the waiter knocked at the door. "He ought to have been a girl."

Presently, at luncheon, he forgot about Delaney. Never, it seemed to him, had Rita been quite so fasci-

nating. She seasoned the repast with amusing gossip—the story of a dog-fight at a rehearsal, a little fight between two little dogs which rapidly became a big fight between two big prima donnas; stories of intrigue in the struggle for fame; droll tales of temperament, love, and jealousy, of pranks played upon one another by the singers, and of misadventures during performances, making, for Parrish, successive pictures of a world new and strange.

“I’ve never been behind the scenes at the opera,” he said.

“You’d like to? Come any time I’m singing.”

“What do you sing Wednesday night?” he asked.

“‘Butterfly,’ but—you’d have to come during the first part of the evening. I have a business engagement later. Wouldn’t you rather come Monday—it’s ‘Manon’—and stay all evening?”

He put his hand over hers upon the table.

“What a question, when Monday is five days further off than Wednesday! Besides, I love you in ‘Butterfly.’ You look just like a Toyokuni. I’ve always wished I could see you in those costumes, close to.”

“All right,” she said. “Come a little before eight. I’ll leave word with the doorman.”

Then she rose, passed behind him, and laid her hands upon his shoulders. “My dear,” she said, “I’m awfully disappointed about something, and like a coward I’ve been putting off telling you. I must go back this afternoon.”

He turned quickly in his chair and looked up at her, echoing stupidly:

"This afternoon?"

"Yes. They long-distanced me while you were out. Isn't it disgusting? It's that idiot Bonata. You remember, I told you about her. She's such a slow study. It's outrageous that they keep her."

"But why do *you* have to go back?" he demanded, rising.

"It's the new opera—goes on a week from Monday. I have several scenes with her, and they've called a rehearsal for ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Oh, Rita!"

"I tried to get them to postpone it," she went on, "but they couldn't. I saw that myself when they explained." She looked disconsolate. "But there's no need for you to come if——"

"Don't be ridiculous!" he cried. "You know perfectly well I couldn't stand it here!"

"Then," she answered, sighing, "there's nothing to do but pack and order the car."

Turning away from her he walked with a slow step to the French windows and looked out upon the balcony and the sea as if to bid them farewell. Then he faced her.

"Well," he said, "they can't take *that* away from us, anyhow!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE Jersey pines were looming black in the February twilight as the limousine slipped swiftly into Lakewood, and it was dark when, after a light repast, Parrish and Rita resumed their way toward New York. Reaching the city before ten, they drove to her house, where, because of her early rehearsal next morning, they parted on the doorstep.

"Wednesday night, then, at the opera house," she said in farewell as Pierre opened the outer door.

Wednesday night—and this only Monday!

At Parrish's own door Ito greeted him with his polite Japanese smile.

"Teregram for you, sir," he said as he carried in the baggage; for Ito had the usual Oriental difficulty with the sounds of "l" and "r."

Parrish knew what the telegram would be. Going to the library he took the yellow envelope from the desk, opened it, and read. Yes, it was from Alice—a tautological announcement that she had arrived "safely" in Cleveland. Also there lay upon the desk a special-delivery letter addressed in her familiar handwriting—legible, slightly unformed, above all, honest.


As the telegram closed with the words "much

love," so the letter opened with the salutation "Dearest," followed by a dash; for dashes served Alice in place of periods, colons, semicolons, and commas.

Hurriedly he read the letter:

George met me at the station with his car and drove me out to the house—It was certainly fine to see them all again—though of course I miss you terribly dear—When I was here before the grading wasn't all finished but now everything looks nice and settled inside and out—although it is certainly what *you* would call "suburban" looking—It's a California bungalow type house—stucco and brown wood—with a second story that you'd hardly notice from outside—and the furniture is mostly "mission"—I can see you turn up your nose at that! I don't think Margaret likes mission furniture—but George the old dear likes it because it's "solid looking"—and all those two ever think of is having everything the way the other wants it—You would think them very unsophisticated and they are—the way I used to be!—but I know you'd like them because they are so good and devoted—and you'd be crazy about the children—They have grown so much since I last saw them that I could hardly believe my eyes—and they made such a fuss over "Auntie Alice" that it made her cry—It certainly is wonderful to have children love you like that and I don't say it because they are Margaret's but they really are *remarkable*—

I think I cried partly because they are such little darlings and partly because their little arms around my neck somehow made my loneliness for you horribly acute—Does that sound crazy dear? Maybe it is but that's how I felt—Oh Dick how I do love you! (How Clara would scold me for writing you that and telling it to you all the time!) She thinks men are so conceited and selfish because she has never known the right *kind* of man and that has made her cynical—She says a woman is a fool to let a man know she cares because a man tires of a woman when he is so sure of her—I don't believe you can lay down any such rule to cover all cases—do you? Anyway I *want* you to be sure of me! And it's lucky for me I do!—because if I *didn't* want you to be you would be just the same—I couldn't help letting you see—



Oh dearest I'm so worried over Margaret! She's so miserable—worse than I thought—The doctor says she ought to have gone to the Adirondacks two or three weeks ago because though it's just pleurisy she won't get over it in this lake climate at this time of year and it might get worse—She has been fighting going because she can't bear to leave George and the children but she is getting frightened about herself now and since I am here she certainly has no excuse—But Dick it means a month or six weeks out here for me and I only reproach myself for not having realized and come sooner—So I can't go back with you when you come through—but I would give anything on earth to see you—Couldn't you stop over a train and come up? But if not I could come down and see you for a minute at the train—That would *help* wouldn't it dear? So if you go west be sure to telegraph me in plenty of time—

Well dear I'm afraid this epistle isn't any too cheerful sounding—but I do miss you so and this is the nearest I can get to talking to you—

Take care of yourself for my sake dear and don't get too tired—You work so hard you know—and there are so many germs around one can't be too careful—

I will write you every day and you must write me as often as you can even if it is only a line just to let me know you are well—And perhaps if we get so lonesome for each other we can't stand it any longer we can talk on the long-distance the way we did when I was here before—

Oh Dick you know how I adore you don't you?

Your loving

ALICE.

P S—

You haven't forgotten what the farmer wrote you about the fences at Blenkinswood have you?

A——

Parrish sighed heavily, tore the letter into small pieces and dropped them into the wastebasket. Out of his welter of conflicting emotions and impulses

emerged a thought of telephoning to her, but quickly he let it slip back into the welter. He would write.

He took a sheet of paper from the rack, dipped his pen, and paused. Then he wrote "Dear," and after pausing again, added "est." But when he blotted the word the final syllable, not having dried so long, was perceptibly lighter than the first.

"Oh, damn it!" he said under his breath.

He tore up the sheet and let the fragments fall to the basket, where Alice's letter already lay; then rising he went to his room, and put on his bathrobe and slippers, whereafter he returned to the desk and sat for a moment, but only to get up again. This time he proceeded to the butler's pantry, where, after picking savagely at the ice, he secured a suitable piece which he washed and deposited in a tall thin glass. Thence he went to the sideboard and, after unlocking it, withdrew a bottle containing an amber fluid. Hastily he poured a generous portion into his glass, and adding water, drank.

But after that he went back to his desk, took up the telephone, and asked for the telegraph office.

His night letter to Alice was long, sympathetic, and uninforming. "Am writing," he ended.

However, he did not write that night, and next morning he was pressed for time; he had been absent from the office for a day; much business would be awaiting him. Moreover, there were errands to be done on the way down. He stopped at his jeweller's, on Fifth Avenue, and was there for the better part

of an hour, closeted with the head of the firm. Thence he went to his florist's, where he ordered flowers to be "telegraphed" to Cleveland.

That night at the club he was requisitioned to make a fourth at bridge, so he put into his pocket the letter he had begun, intending to finish it when he got home. But it was late when he got home; and on Wednesday morning there was the office calling him again. A meeting kept him downtown later than usual, and when, after taking his walk up the Avenue, he reached the apartment, it was practically time to dress. Ordinarily, he would have had more time, but to-night he must dine early in order to be at the stage door promptly at a quarter before eight.

CHAPTER XVIII

HE WAS even a little ahead of time, but the doorman was expecting him and let him through, sending a young man to pilot him.

Parrish had been behind scenes before, but never in such a place as this. Here, as in an ordinary theatre, he was aware of worn gray boards underfoot, of brick walls, crude and solid, and of the pervasive musty smell common to all playhouse stages. He was dimly conscious, as he moved along, of innumerable ropes and cables running aloft, of cyclopean lighting devices to be avoided, of furniture and properties piled in corners, and of the brutal bareness of unpainted canvas. Yet this stage, because of its vast size, was unlike any other. It was cosmic. In its dim vistas workmen were but gnomes; beyond the towering bulk of the scene set for the first act lay an undiscovered country; the dark, deep spaces of the fly gallery, above, had the remoteness of a midnight sky. Following the young man, Parrish began to feel that life itself, becoming touched with madness, had turned its clothing wrong side out and gone to masquerading.

Turning a corner and leading the way up several carpeted steps, the pilot knocked upon a metal

door, and upon receiving an answer from within, departed, leaving Parrish standing there.

Almost immediately the door was opened narrowly, showing a maid in a frilled cap.

"Monsieur Parrish?"

"Yes."

She opened the door wider, saying "Entrez, s'il vous plaît, monsieur," and as she relieved him of hat, overcoat, and cane, continued, "Mademoiselle vous demande mille pardons, monsieur, mais elle n'est pas encore habillée. Donnez-vous la peine de vous asseoir, monsieur?"

Selecting the most comfortable of the wicker chairs Parrish obediently sat down, and as the maid departed to the next room, began to entertain himself by inspecting his surroundings. Long and narrow, the room had the dimensions of a rather large hall bedroom; there was a window of dull bevelled glass, white and blind like an eye with a cataract, but Parrish had a feeling that the apartment hardly knew the light of day, much less the sunlight. Without its mirrors, bright electric lights, and chintz, it would have been a very gloomy place. The chintz, which was of cream colour with a running pattern of rose wreaths, dominated the place. It covered the walls and the couch; the window and the door leading to the dressing room were curtained with it; it had been used for upholstering the chairs. A label-covered wardrobe trunk standing in one corner, a small table and a writing desk of cream-coloured enamel, some

mirrors, photographs, and vases of flowers, half-heartedly attempted to dispute the sway of the rosewreath pattern, but the mirrors reflected it and the other objects were but spots against it. Even a great sheaf of American Beauty roses, standing in a vase resembling an enormous megaphone of brass, became inconspicuous against those serpentine of printed roses on the walls.

His attention was attracted by some caricatures of operatic figures, and he rose to look at them. They were drawn by a famous tenor whose talent for distorted portraiture was often mentioned in the newspapers, and among them was a wicked sketch of Rita, in *Mélisande's* trailing tresses, with her mouth wide open. He was looking disapprovingly at this when he heard the clink of curtain rings behind him, as the portière at the dressing-room door was thrust back, and Rita's voice calling to him to come in.

The maid stood aside in the doorway as he entered, then withdrew, closing the door after her.

Rita was seated at a long dressing table with triple mirrors strongly lighted, when, pausing in the final processes of making up, she turned her head to greet him. The silken kimono, brocaded obi, and convoluted wig of glistening coal-black hair, were those of *Madame Butterfly*, but richly picturesque as the Japanese costume was, his glance at it was cursory. It was her face that held him. He stared at it, disconcerted. For though there was a trace of

Rita in the eyes, disguised with heavy make-up—the lashes beaded with oily black, the inner corners dotted with red, the outer corners lined obliquely to give an Oriental tilt—and though it was her voice that spoke to him from behind that mask of grease-paint and powder, he could not feel that this was she. Like the lad in the fairy tale whose loved one is transformed by witchcraft into another shape, he shared memories with the extraordinary being before him, yet felt that she was a stranger to him.

With an instinctive desire to overcome this sense of unreality he went back to the subject of which they had last spoken, asking, "How did the rehearsal go yesterday?"

She was leaning toward the mirror, giving a final touch of colour to her lower lip.

"Lasted all day," she said, as if speaking to her own reflection.

Turning her head from side to side she inspected critically the fit of her wig; then with both hands she pressed it down more firmly.

Meanwhile Parrish, anxious to break through this sense of remoteness, and seeking her eyes, moved behind her and looked at her in the glass.

"Did you get very tired?" he asked.

She turned quickly.

"Oh, don't do that!" she cried. "Don't look at me in the glass when you're talking to me. It's unlucky!"

He smiled.

"I didn't know that you were superstitious."

"I suppose we all are. Things here depend so much on luck. Don't you remember—we were speaking of that the other day? For instance"—her laugh was a little bit apologetic—"we are superstitious about whistling in the dressing room. It brings bad luck to whoever is nearest the door. And I wouldn't dare have any shoes on a shelf higher than my head. That's awful—poverty, disaster, death! And yesterday I didn't sing the last few measures of the opera. I never do until the first night. And there's an old superstition about——"

"I hope," he put in, "that there is none about receiving a gift in the dressing room, because I've brought you this."

From an inside pocket he drew a flat leather-covered box, and placed it before her on the table.

She seized his hand.

"Oh, you dear! How dear of you!" Then, pressing the button which released the lid of the box, and discovering, in its black velvet nest, a flexible linked bracelet of platinum, set with square diamonds, chic and costly, she cried out again, "Oh, it's lovely! You extravagant boy!"

Pulling back one kimono sleeve she slipped the bracelet on her arm and, holding it away from her, gazed at it admiringly. Then, rising and taking both his hands, she exclaimed, "I'd like to hug you! But I mustn't. This liquid powder rubs off."

"I'll take a chance!" he said.

"But I won't," she returned, laughing. "I have to go on too soon."

As if in confirmation of her words the maid knocked at the door, announcing:

"Le prélude va commencer, mademoiselle."

"Bien, Sophie." She beckoned her, and taking off the bracelet placed it in Sophie's hand, saying, "Look at the beautiful thing monsieur has given me!" Then, as the maid admired, she added, "Now you take good care of it, Sophie!" And to Parrish, "I hate to take it off, but it might be noticed from the front—and of course it is out of character."

"Yes, of course."

He was disappointed. He wanted her to wear it. With it on she seemed more to belong to him.

"Now come," said she, "and I'll show you where to stay and watch the act," and she led the way out through the anteroom, down the steps and to the stage.

The scene, showing the Japanese house with its terrace and garden on a hilltop overlooking the town and bay of Nagasaki, was fully set, and the footlights and borders were aglare. Two singers, costumed for the parts of Pinkerton and Goro, were standing at one side, well back, prepared to be "discovered" when the curtain should rise.

This obvious readiness made Parrish nervous as he walked across the stage at Rita's side. "What if the curtain should suddenly ascend!" he was thinking to himself. And when, just as he was thinking

that, the first violins vigorously attacked the beginning of the overture he was startled to the point of panic. To be caught out there in the middle of the stage—a nightmare! He looked anxiously at Rita, but she reassured him with a smile.

When the curtain did rise they were safely off the scene, seated in two gilt chairs behind the concealing proscenium arch and its appendant draperies. Hitherto the music had been muffled by the curtain, but now there came a burst of sound from the entire choir of strings, and simultaneously a feeling of air in circulation between stage and auditorium, and of a great dark something out there beyond the footlights, very quiet but very much alive.

From their vantage point they watched the bustling Goro exhibiting the little house to the American naval officer; the scene with Suzuki, the servant; the arrival of the American consul, Sharpless. Then came Pinkerton's aria, whimsically introducing a snatch of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and the amusing passage with its convivial invitation—the English words "milk punch or whisky?" leaping out so startlingly from the mellifluous Italian text.

Presently, motioning to him to remain seated, Rita rose.

"My cue soon," she whispered, and left him.

Soon after, he heard the little hubbub of women's voices that precedes the entrance of Butterfly; then softly, in Rita's thrilling soprano, the recitative: "*Ancora un passo or via,*" with music mounting like

the hillside steps she was supposed to have climbed; and following immediately on this—still from a little distance—her happy song of love.

The wistful story of this opera and the passionate yearning of its melodies had always moved Parrish, but now he felt a new emotion. This was not Coventry in "Madame Butterfly"—it was the woman he loved. Breathlessly he awaited the first vision of her on the brow of the hill, his heart thumping thickly; but when, after repeating the plaintive, "I have come at the call of love," she appeared, he could see her but dimly through tears standing in his eyes. Startled and chagrined at his emotion, he hastily brushed them away with the back of his hand.

Thenceforward he sat spellbound, listening for Rita's voice, watching her every gesture. How perfectly she simulated the mannerisms of a gentle little Japanese! How expressive her hands! And how small she looked—or was it only that the tenor was so big and fat? "Young lieutenant"—with those dimensions! There was something unmanly about tenors, anyway. Come to think of it, he had never known any man with a high voice to make good in business.

The wedding guests arrived upon the scene, the ceremony was performed and the company departed, leaving Butterfly and Pinkerton alone. Their wedding night. The footlights had been growing dimmer; stars began to show through the back drop.

The music! Nobody could equal Puccini as a composer of these throbbing, passionate love songs.

"*Ti serro palpitante*," sang the tenor, and suiting the action to the word, seized her in his arms.

That was the beastly thing about a woman's being on the stage: she must submit to being handled by such louts!

But in spite of his aversion for the tenor he was again deeply moved by the fiery surge of the big duet with which the act ended, as Pinkerton led Butterfly to the nuptial chamber.

Slowly, like a great cloud drifting across a mountain top, the curtain floated down, while, from the space beyond, swept applause which made Parrish think of the roar of rain on a tin roof.

As the magnificent footman drew back a corner of the heavy tableau curtain to pass the singers out for the first encore, Parrish stood up and peered through the aperture. In the dim auditorium he could see the people in the boxes nearest the proscenium arch—the men a background for the women—proud women with white shoulders and vivid plumed fans, who, because of the blinding glare of the footlights in his eyes, looked unreal to him, like paper figures cut from fashion magazines.

Then, as the singers moved out before the curtain, the applause rolled louder. He watched them taking hands, smiling, bowing to each other and to the audience, their faces sharply lighted from beneath, like the faces of ballet girls in Degas' paintings.

Finally, after many encores, Rita alone, with the brilliance beating on the youthful contours of her chin and throat; then suddenly, through the air, flowers falling, seeming to come from nowhere, and men's voices in the distance calling "Brava!"

Her arms were full of flowers when she came to him.

"I must hurry!" she said. "I have to be on at the beginning of the next act, you know. I don't believe it's worth your staying while I change."

"Your engagement"—he began interrogatively, as they moved toward her dressing room—"that business you spoke of—it hasn't by any chance been——"

"No, I'm sorry," she broke in.

"I'll run along, then," he said, still with a faint tentativeness.

"I'm afraid you'll have to," she agreed as they reached the anteroom. She was speaking rapidly, like a busy executive to whom time is everything. "Why don't you go out front and hear the rest from there? Here"—she snatched an envelope from the desk, scribbled a few words on it in pencil, and thrust it into his hand. "Take that to the box office. Ask for Mr. Spiegel. He'll give you a seat if there's one to be had. Now I really must——" She turned toward the door of the inner room.

"Thanks," he said. "Shall I come back for you afterwards?"

"Oh, no. I'll be very late." The words came

over her shoulder. But from the doorway she looked back, exclaiming, "Oh—I almost forgot! Come to dinner Sunday night."

With that she disappeared.

"Thanks, I will," he said to the chintz curtain, and taking up hat, coat, and stick, left the room.

Of course she was in an awful hurry—no doubt about that. She just didn't have time to think. And she was pleased with the bracelet—he could see that when she thanked him. No particular reason why she should speak of it again.

She couldn't mean that he wasn't to see her until Sunday. Impossible! She just wanted to be sure he wouldn't make another engagement for Sunday night. Yes, that must be it.

He passed through the stage door and walked up the side street toward the front of the building to find the lobby full of men in evening dress, smoking. And when he pushed the envelope through the box-office window, "There's not a single orchestra chair left," said Mr. Spiegel. "Will you take the management's box?"

Parrish thanked him and took the coupons.

The box, which an usher unlocked for him, was near the centre of the horseshoe. A brass plate on the door bore the name of the impresario, and a like plate on the next door informed Parrish that the adjoining box was that of Hermann Krauss. If he were to go in now and sit down at the front, and Krauss should be in his own box, he would have to talk with

him; and he was not in humour to talk. He took a chair at the rear, where the high partition sheltered him from view.

Just what was her business about, he wondered—not that it was any particular affair of his, but what sort of business arrangements did opera singers make? Of course they had contracts. No doubt Rita's lawyer looked them over for her. He hoped he was a good lawyer. But did they sign contracts at night—in dressing rooms? That didn't seem very businesslike. You'd think they'd go to the manager's office—or to the lawyer's office—or that the lawyer would come to the singer's house. Artistic people were notoriously careless about business. And she made so much money—probably with her it was easy come, easy go. What she needed was the advice of a good sound business man. She might do a lot worse than to consult him about some of these things.

Now the house was darkened and the curtain rose. The affecting melodies, and his own emotions as he saw Rita—a tiny figure in that great gold-framed picture—and heard her voice carrying through those vast spaces, combined to produce in him a state of mournful intoxication in which he remained until, as the opera was about to end, people in the parterre boxes began to steal away to get to their limousines before the rush of the general exodus should begin. He decided to go, too. If he waited to the very end and went out

with the crowd he was almost certain to meet people he knew.

Having told his chauffeur to keep out of the jam by parking in a side street, over toward Sixth Avenue, he went out through the main entrance, and headed up Broadway, intending to cross at the next corner, but the street was crowded and he had to wait on the curb. He glanced back toward the stage door.

He supposed that she would take off her make-up before seeing to that business.

A street car stopped; a man jumped off, came dodging through the traffic, and brushed by him as he hurried down the street. Struck by something familiar in the man's appearance Parrish turned and looked after him. He was walking rapidly; the collar of his overcoat was turned up, and he wore a checked cloth cap. Yes, something familiar. Suddenly he got it. If it wasn't that piano tuner from Atlantic City it was someone mighty like him!

He stood looking after him, but as he looked the young man was lost to view in the crowd that was beginning to emerge from the carriage entrance near the stage door.

CHAPTER XIX

EVIDENTLY Rita had not meant to put him off until Sunday, for next morning she called him up at his office. She wanted to thank him again for the bracelet, she said; she hadn't had a chance to thank him properly last night, she was so rushed. She had the bracelet on now. She loved it. She was going to wear it this evening to dinner. It would be perfect with a black velvet evening gown she had.

So she was going out to dinner!

"What are you going to do to-morrow night?" he asked.

"Some people are coming up to talk about a tour to the Pacific Coast. But I tell you—I'm going to the dressmaker's in the afternoon. Wouldn't it amuse you to come around there? And we could go out to tea after."

That day at lunch Parrish told his partner, Stuart Bement, that the period of depression which had so long been afflicting the country was, in his opinion, about over. This was a good market to buy in. By June conditions would be normal.

Yes, he was feeling optimistic. He carried his optimism up town with him that evening, down in

the morning, and up again when in the late afternoon he went to meet Rita.

The name of her dressmaker had long been familiar to him; it was mentioned with respect by the best-dressed women he knew, and he himself had often found his eyes drawn to the double tier of windows, wide and sumptuous, in which its latest costumes were exhibited to the passing Avenue; but he had never entered it before; and now, as he did so, he found himself a little ill at ease. Vaguely he was aware of counters, showcases, and wardrobes of polished wood and shining plate glass, holding all manner of feminine equipment; and although it was so obviously put there to be looked at, he had an instinct not to look. To have looked would have seemed an impropriety. Yet why? These things, which suggested to the corner of his eyes that they were dainty, sheer, and ribbony, belonged to an incorporated company. Why did woman's dress seem so much more personal than man's—not only her under dress, not only a dress belonging to some specific woman, but even a frock in a shop window?

There approached him a being shapely in an almost startlingly plain black dress. With her honey-coloured hair she had the air of mounting toward him like a sunlit breaker gracefully rising to a crest. Then, her head a little to one side, she raised her lined eyebrows in polite interrogation.

He answered with, "I'm looking for Miss Coventry."

"Oh, yes." Immediately she was smiling and gracious. She undulated to the elevators, pressed the button for him and, when the boy opened the door, enunciated with careful elegance, "Let this gentleman off at the fawth flaw, please."

The fourth floor differed from the first in that the latter was a place of finished things; the former a place of things not quite finished. Except for chairs the room was unfurnished; there were long threads on the gray-green carpet, and opposite the elevators a battery of fitting-rooms, gray panelled, with lights shining from within through bevelled glass.

As he emerged from the elevator two black-clad women stepped toward him.

"Miss Coventry?" he asked.

Ah, yes! Like destroyers picking up a merchantman they swerved and convoyed him.

"The gentleman's here, Miss Coventry," called one, rapping at a fitting-room door.

"Just a minute," came Rita's voice; whereat the convoy, having brought him to his anchorage, sailed away.

Presently the door was opened by a middle-aged woman wearing steel-rimmed spectacles.

Rita was facing him, posed like a manikin, with arms slightly extended. From her shoulders hung a trailing scarf of silvery fabric, very thin, which, attached to bracelets on either wrist, made a background resembling a pair of soft, half-spread wings. The gown itself was of brocade, sapphire blue and

silver, cut to a deep V in front and held in place by the slightest of shoulder-straps.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed, looking at her white arms.

The fitter, moving behind her, gave a final touch to the scarf. Simultaneously a saleswoman entered.

"Here's that little frock, dearie," she said, exhibiting a handful of shell-pink chiffon over lace. "It's just come in. You're the very first to see it. It's lucky you're here! Mr. S. says right away 'Now there's a creation for Miss Coventry. Put it aside for her.' Aren't those little rosebuds sweet, though? I've never sold you a frock like this, dearie, and I certainly do want you to have it. It's so sympathetic."

"This is Miss McCafferty," said Rita, introducing him.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said the young woman.

"She's a burglar," Rita went on, "but she does know how to dress me."

Miss McCafferty rolled her bright-blue Irish eyes in humorous protest.

"Why, *dearie!* How can you *say* such a thing? Now, just to show you, I'm going to let you have this little dress at a real sacrifice."

"It's too young for me," said Rita, after looking at it appraisingly.

Miss McCafferty turned to Parrish with mock hopelessness.

"C'n you beat it?" she demanded. "With *her*

looks!" And to Rita: "Dearie, you know perfectly well you can wear *anything!*"

"I haven't time to try it on to-day," said Rita.

But Miss McCafferty was prepared to work fast.

"I'll have a model slip it on for you," said she, and thrusting her head out of the door she shrilled "Claire!" and passed the gown out to unseen hands. Then as Rita was about to change, Parrish followed the fitter from the room and waited outside the door.

He had waited but a moment when there appeared a youthful model, in the shell-pink gown, looking like a baby cloud at sunset. She entered the fitting-room—where from over the partition he could hear their voices—and did not emerge until Rita came out dressed for the street.

"You make no mistake in taking that little frock," assured Miss McCafferty as they stood by the elevator. "It'll make you look like an anngeno. It's so sympathetic! Well, good-bye, dearie. Come in soon again." And with a little bow to Parrish: "Glad to've met you, I'm sure."

For tea they went to a neighbouring hotel, where there was a dark wainscoted dining room with tables not too close together, each with a softly glowing lamp, red shaded, somehow suggestive of confidences. Most of the tables were occupied by couples intent upon their own low-voiced conversation.

"This place always amuses me," said Rita as they sat. "It's known far and wide as a place where people go when they don't want to be seen. So

they all come here and see each other, and pretend they don't."

Over the tea he found an opportunity to speak of something that was on his mind.

"By the way, I thought I caught sight of that young piano tuner the other night?" The statement was a question.

"Yes; he came around to see me."

"At the opera, the night I was there?"

"For a minute, yes."

"Are you going to sing his songs?"

She nodded. "I told him I would, you know."

"Well," he declared emphatically, "all I've got to say is—that young man ought to be mighty grateful to you."

"He ought to be," she agreed, "but he doesn't show any signs of it yet. I've been wondering about it. Anyway, we are working out some plans to push his songs."

"In spite of his ingratitude, eh?"

"But he's a genius."

"Huh!" said Parrish. "Genius is an overworked word. Nowadays any one who manufactures a dinky little automobile, or paints a picture that looks as if a defective child had done it, or raises the biggest squash in the county, gets himself called a genius."

Since seeing Delaney so near the opera house he had given the case of that young man some thought, and he was prepared now to state his conclusions; but Rita dismissed the topic, saying lightly, "Per-

haps you're right; he may not be a genius. But I assure you he is a new type to me, and odd types have always interested me."

"Certainly you've seen enough of them," he said, diverted. "Lord, what a lot of people you know! And they seem to know you so well, too—or think they do. I think *I* do. When I'm with you I think so, but away from you I sometimes get the feeling that I don't know you so very well, after all—that I've lost you to whatever people you happen to be with at the time. And who are they all? I try to imagine where you are, but most of the time it's all vague. I don't know enough of your life to make a mental picture of it. Why don't I? That's what I want to know. You don't seem to me to be a secretive person."

"No," she answered, "I'm naturally frank, I think." Then, smiling faintly: "But supposing I were secretive—would you expect me to tell you so—or be secretive about it?"

He laughed, but this time held firmly to his point.

"I've never felt this way before," he continued. "I can't figure it out. It makes me restless. I want you to know all about me, and I should think you'd want me to know all about you. Haven't you felt that way about people you've cared for? There was a girl I cared for a great deal and I could come pretty near reading every thought in her head."

"And are you still interested in her?" Rita asked.

"She was awfully sweet," said he. "I shall always have a mighty tender feeling for her."

Rita looked at her jewelled wrist watch.

"It's getting late," she said. "I must be going."

As they were waiting for the check he pursued his earlier thought.

"I want you to see my apartment," he told her. "I have some old things that will interest you. Will you come down and dine with me some night soon?"

"I'd love to, sometime when I'm not so rushed."

"Well, anyway," he said, knowing better than to press the matter, "I'll see you Sunday night."

CHAPTER XX

HOWEVER, he was not to see her on Sunday night.

Next morning he had a protracted talk over the long-distance telephone with the manager of Parrish & Bement's Chicago office.

"All right," he said rather irritably at the close of the conversation, "either Mr. Bement or I will be out there on Monday. Probably Mr. Bement this time."

But when he went into his partner's room and suggested to him that it was his turn to make the Chicago journey, he found him obdurate. The idea of opening a Chicago office had originated with Parrish, and that office had always been regarded in the firm as Parrish's particular concern. But that was not all. The journey that Bement was momentarily expecting to embark upon was not to Chicago, but to his home on Long Island, Mrs. Bement's doctor having informed him that it was probably only a matter of hours before his presence would be urgently required.

Parrish endeavoured to express a proper sympathetic interest in the approaching ordeal of parenthood. Well, there was nothing else for it—he would have to go to Chicago himself. It was unavoidable.

He must call up Rita and let her know he couldn't come. What vile luck! Who would be there Sunday night? He supposed she'd get some man to take his place. Who would it be? Who would be in his place, at her right?

He always felt uneasy about ringing Rita up, since telephoning to her was connected in his mind with disappointments; but this morning, rather to his surprise, Pierre admitted that she was at home, and a moment later he heard her voice.

"Oh, that's too bad," she said when he had broken the news to her.

"Yes, and I may have to be out there a week," he answered gloomily.

"Well—be sure to let me hear from you when you get back."

"When I get back?" he repeated. "Isn't there some way of my seeing you before I go?"

"When do you leave?"

"To-morrow afternoon—two forty-five."

"Wait till I look up my engagement list." She began to ruminate aloud: "Um—let's see—Sunday. No, I don't think—unless you—— I tell you: I have to be downtown at three to-morrow afternoon. How would you like me to drive you to the station?"

"That will be great!" he cried. Then his voice became tender. "And there's something else I want, Rita: your photograph. I want to have it with me."

"I'll bring you one."

"Thanks, dear—and write on it, will you?"

"Yes. About quarter after two, then?"

He was waiting, with his baggage, in the lower hall next afternoon when her trim little French landaulet stopped at the door. He was becoming nervous; but she wasn't so very late; and Fifth Avenue wasn't crowded on Sunday—they could drive down quickly.

"You brought the photograph?" he asked eagerly as they drove off.

She handed it to him. He slipped it out of the glazed paper envelope.

"Oh," he exclaimed, "as the Festival Queen in 'Louise'! Lovely!"

But secretly he was a little disappointed—not with the photograph, but with the inscription: "Faithfully yours, Rita Coventry." He often signed his letters to men friends "Faithfully yours." He couldn't help wishing she had at least written "To Dick"—or better than that, since the picture showed her as Louise, she might have written those lines from the opera which would always have for him a significance so tender:

*Pourquoi serais-je belle
Si ce n'est pour être aimée?*

Still, when you really thought about it, that word "faithfully" could mean a great deal. He opened the suitcase on the floor in front of him and gently placed the photograph within.

"Do you know I've never had a letter from you?" he said. "Not even a little note." He slipped off his glove and took her white-gloved hand, which was lying in her lap. "Send me a line out to Chicago, will you, Rita?"

"I'll try," she answered; but the little chuckle that followed the remark disconcerted him. "I got a letter from a cowboy yesterday," she explained. "He said he saw my picture in a magazine, and *he* wants me to write to him."

He smiled dimly.

Ah, what a short glimpse of her this little ride gave him; already they were halfway to the station.

"To-night, when you are going in to dinner," he said, "you can think of me sitting alone in the dining car."

"It's a shame you have to go," she answered, pressing his hand.

"I made a desperate effort to get out of it," he told her, and with feeling added: "I simply loathe to leave you. I hope you're going to miss me?"

"It's this getting away that's the hard part," she sympathized. "The break of leaving. But it won't be so bad when you get there. You'll be busy. You'll be back before you know it."

"But your dinner——" he began.

"Oh, I'll be giving other dinners."

"And don't forget that you're coming to dine with me. I tell you: I'll wire you from Chicago as

soon as I know when I'll be home again. Then you can save the first free evening."

She nodded.

"You won't mind coming alone? I thought I wouldn't ask anybody else—unless you think appearances might——"

"Appearances?" she broke in with a little laugh. "You're right—you *don't* know me. I can't be bothered with such things. I go where I please." She laughed again. "I'm not quite so emancipated, though, as some people in the opera. Apparently some of them regard gossip as an asset—good advertising."

"As soon as I get back then!" he said almost gayly as the car passed under the overhanging cliffs of Grand Central Station; and as a porter advanced to open the door he let go her hand and exclaimed in a low voice, "I love you, dear!"

The man took his bags and he alighted.

"Where shall I tell him to drive?" he asked, pausing, hat in hand, and thinking how luxurious she looked against the soft upholstery.

"The Discaphone studios—he knows."

"Making records—on Sunday?"

"Yes; they do it for me because I'm so busy through the week."

"What are you singing?"

"'Bonnie Doon,'" she replied.

Some taxicabs had driven up behind them, and now, unable to proceed, set up a hooting of horns

which reverberated raucously in that cavernous space.

Quickly he closed the door. The car flashed away. He turned and followed the porter into the busy concourse of the station.

Sometime during the night he was awakened by a silence. The train was creeping to a standstill. Wondering where he might be, he raised the curtain, looked out, and recognized the dingy Cleveland station. The train stopped; the airbrakes sighed wistfully.

Alice! Alice very near! The train wasn't scheduled to stop at Cleveland, and even if it had been, she could not have come down at such an hour. It was really kinder, then, not to have let her know that he was passing through. He should have written to her, though. He ought to have done that. He really should have finished that letter to her when he came across it in his pocket a day or two ago. But he would write her from Chicago.

Come to think of it, he hadn't heard from her in some time. Almost a week. And she had said that she was going to write to him every day. What did her silence mean? He hoped her sister wasn't worse.

Vaguely, as a background to his thoughts, he was aware of the metallic clanging of journal-box doors being slammed shut, one after another, as an inspector worked his way along beside the train: first far off, then nearer, then on the front of the car he

was in. Now he could see the moving light of the man's lantern.

Poor Alice! Not in the whole world was there a sweeter, gentler spirit!

The inspector passed beneath the window, his lantern making a revealing flare around him. The light penetrated the dusty double panes, and there was a moment when, for Parrish, the inner darkness was dispelled.

He had treated Alice badly. He had been selfish, cruel. Now for the first time he acknowledged the truth. And the truth stabbed him.

The sound of the slamming of journal-box doors grew faint in the distance; the train began to move; it slipped out into the night. But Parrish felt it now an unrelenting force, like Fate, which had him in its clutches and was drawing him away. For a long time he lay there in the darkness thinking of Alice, his heart filled with loneliness.

His first day in Chicago was crowded with business; in the evening there was a dinner to attend and it was late when he got back to his hotel; instead of writing to Alice he sent a long explanatory telegram, carefully phrased, pleading business pressure and promising if possible to see her at Cleveland on the return journey.

"Am worried at not hearing from you," his message to her ended. "How is your sister and how are you? Please wire answer."

It was a little awkward to let her know he was in

Chicago; in one sense he would have much preferred not to communicate with her until he got back; but he felt better for having sent the telegram.


Her reply, which arrived early the next afternoon, surprised him somewhat. Considering the length of his dispatch to her, she might, he thought, have been a little more communicative. Her message ran:

Margaret doing nicely. Am well. Don't trouble to stop here.

Ten words exactly. How like a woman! A woman thought nothing of spending forty dollars on a hat, but to save a few cents would boil a telegram to its bare bones. Though it contained the information he desired he found the message unsatisfactory. Her telegrams usually ended with the word "love." That, though, would have made eleven words. But how like her, that last self-sacrificing phrase, telling him not to trouble to stop at Cleveland on the way back, although he well knew her eagerness to see him.

The effect upon Parrish of his wire to Alice was so agreeable that, two days later, he telegraphed again. This time there was no answer. Two days more passed, however, before he noticed that; and by then the foreground of his mind was occupied by something else: Why didn't that letter come from Rita?

Toward the middle of the week he had begun to look for it, having his mail sent to his room with the papers early in the morning, and making excuses to get back to the hotel during the day. But here it



was Saturday; he was going home this afternoon having heard nothing of Rita beyond what he had gleaned from New York newspapers, stale with the peculiar staleness of newspapers twenty-four hours old.

The concert had occurred on Wednesday. She had sung not only a charming new arrangement of "Bonnie Doon," but, as encores, two other songs by Patrick Delaney, the promising young American composer, who provided a sympathetic accompaniment. Both the papers he saw mentioned that Rita had been in unusually fine voice.

On the line that passed through Cleveland he was offered only an upper berth, so he took another road. Alice would understand. In New York, of course, letters from her would be awaiting him, and when he answered them he would explain. But when on Sunday afternoon he reached his apartment, he had only one thought: to see Rita. The early twilight was shadowing the city as he arrived at her house.

"Mademoiselle is not well," said Pierre. "I will see."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Parrish asked, alarmed.

"Only a little cold, monsieur, but she did not get up to-day. Mademoiselle has to be so very careful. She sings to-morrow night."

Pierre was not such a bad sort after all!

While he was gone Parrish traced patterns on the rug with his cane.

"This way, monsieur," said the butler when he returned, and then up those two well-remembered flights he led the way to Rita's bedroom door, where he stood aside and motioned Parrish to enter.

The sounds coming from within were not indicative of illness; several people were talking animatedly, and Parrish entered to the accompaniment of a rumbling chuckle, uttered by a bearded gentleman reclining upon the foot of Rita's bed, whom he at once recognized as the big basso, Frémecourt.

"And what do you think she do then?" he thundered. "You think she thank me? Hah! No!" He roared derisively. "No! She call me names. 'You grea-at, beeg, clumsy bool!' she say. And all for what? Because I try to do her leetle service! I say to her: 'Madame, your skirt is beautiful, but it ees leetle beet open in the back.'" He threw up his hands in comic resignation.

Rita, while joining in the laughter, waved to Parrish. He crossed the room, took her outstretched hand, and somewhat to his surprise found himself being drawn down by it.

"On the cheek," she said. "I have a cold. You know Mrs. Fernis, I think, and Mr. and Mrs. Schoen? And this beeg bool, sitting where I should like to put my feet, is Monsieur Frémecourt—Mr. Parrish."

Laughing again, they greeted him. Frémecourt rose, made Parrish a brief little bow, and cried out to Rita in booming protest:

"Hah! So you, too, call me bool? It is too much!

"I go!" He took her hand, bent over, and for a moment extinguished her in his astrakhan beard. Then standing erect he smacked his lips, and with a grand gesture proclaimed, "You see, my darling, I do not fear to kees your sweet leeps. Your leetle germs have for me no terrors. On the contrary, they shall have a nice nesting place in my beard."

With a flourish of farewells he departed, and had hardly gone when Mrs. Fernis rose.

"Remember, dear," she warned, "the doctor said you were not to talk. You've been talking altogether too much. I blame myself for having stayed so long."

The Schoens made this their cue for departing also.

"I suppose I ought to go, too," said Parrish, left alone with her, but as he spoke he drew his chair close to the bed.

"Oh, not right away," she said. "Tell me about your trip."

"There's nothing to tell," said he, "except that I accomplished what I went for. I thought you said you'd write to me?"

"I did start a letter, but some people came in and interrupted me and I didn't have time to finish it."

"Let me have it, anyway. I've never had a letter from you, you know."

"Oh," she answered, "I found it kicking around my desk yesterday and tore it up. I had your telegram by then, you see."

There was a knock at the door.

"The doctor, mademoiselle," announced Pierre.

Parrish rose as the middle-aged physician entered, carrying his bag.

"What would you do with a girl like this?" he began as soon as she had introduced them. "I can't do anything with her. I tell her not to use her voice, and I come and find a mob of people leaving the house."

"Mr. Parrish just came," defended Rita.

"And I'm just going," he supplemented.

"Anyway," Rita went on, "all you doctors are bullies." She turned to Parrish. "Of course you know about their latest fad? Colds aren't colds any more—they're autointoxication, if you please. So what does this brute do? He puts me on a diet: Nothing fit to eat. And I love my little tummy so!"

"A lot of difference it makes what I tell you to do," retorted the doctor good-humouredly. "I can't see why you have me at all. Yes, I can, too—to patch you up in time to sing. You're too strong for your own good, young lady; that's what's the matter with you!"

He laid his case on a table near the bed and opened it. As he did so Pierre entered, carrying a tray. The doctor looked at it.

"Here!" he exclaimed. "What's that bacon doing on top of that milk toast?"

"I can't eat that soggy stuff without something to flavour it," protested Rita.

"But I told you," the doctor insisted, "nothing smoked and nothing fried."

"Pierre," said Rita, "you must learn to time your entrances. Take the tray back and bring it after the doctor has gone."

"Without that bacon!" added the latter severely as he screwed the top on an atomizer.

Parrish took Rita's hand. What a lovely invalid she was!

"Tuesday night, then?"

"Yes, unless I'm dead of starvation."

"A little before eight?"

She nodded.

The rosy glow of lamps fell caressingly upon her face and throat. He held her hand for an instant, gazing at her. Frémecourt had kissed her on the lips before them all. Why couldn't he before the doctor? But he knew why. It was because he wanted to so much.

CHAPTER XXI

ON MONDAY he had men up to tune and polish his miniature grand piano, and he left word with Ito to be sure to have the polisher remove that mark on the music rack where a cigarette had burned it, long ago. On his way downtown he bought a piano-lamp with a carved Florentine base and a shade of Burgundy-colour silk, and that evening he and Ito did some rearranging in the living room, turning the piano so that a person seated at the instrument would face the room, with the lamp-light falling from behind. When the furniture was settled to his liking, Parrish tried Rita's photograph, in its new silver frame, in various places. It looked best, he thought, upon the mantelpiece, where Alice's picture, also silver framed, had so long stood alone.

But where to put Alice? He carried the portrait to his room and tried it on his dresser and his chiffonier; then, dissatisfied, he went into the library and stood it on his desk, where for some curious reason it again seemed out of place. Strange how hard it was to find a corner for it. The effort made him sad.

He had not greatly relished the thought of facing

a pile of letters from Alice on that desk when he returned from Chicago, but having found none he discovered he was disappointed. Never before had she gone so long without communicating with him. It was very peculiar. With a sigh he took up his pen to write to her.

His letter did not altogether satisfy him; under the circumstances, however, it was the best he could do; he hoped she would not notice the gaps. He sealed it, affixed a special-delivery stamp, dropped it in the mail chute in the hall, and returned to the living room.

How different it looked now, with the new lamp, the piano turned around, and Rita's picture on the mantelpiece. That, of course—the placing of her picture there—was the great change. A grim little allegory of the love-life of a man!

Next morning he gave Ito explicit directions about that evening's dinner. They would have cocktails, and for hors d'œuvre, fresh caviare; the soup would be Russian borsch; then filets mignons with mushrooms under glass, and crisp little potatoes gaufrettes, followed by salad, cheese, and coffee. He would bring some of that special coffee home with him this afternoon.

From his well-stocked wine closet he took the two bottles he most prized: a chartreuse which had been extremely choice even in pre-Volstead days, and his last quart of Krug 1908.

He wore a fur-lined coat that day. Winter had

come back. A fine snow driven by a gale from the northwest stung his face as he walked to the Elevated, leaning into the wind.

Anyway, her cold was better; she had sung last night.

The roadbed of the Elevated was covered with a thin layer of snow, like frosting on a cake. The man at the ticket-chopping box had the collar of his blue cloth coat turned up; his face was purple with the cold, and frozen breath clung to his moustache. Now and then he would put his woollen mittens to his ears as he jiggled in his felt boots, his back to the storm. A fashionably dressed woman standing near him, waiting for the train, wore a turban and cape of caracul under which her arms were folded and her shoulders hunched, elevating the cape and making it and the skirt beneath seem even shorter than the fashion of the day demanded. Of her face one could see only a pair of bright eyes, a bit of upper lip, and a saucy nose. On her feet were light patent-leather slippers with French heels, and these, and the trim length of taupe-coloured silk stocking she exhibited—stockings the shade of sunburned skin—seemed the more inadequate in contrast to the warm bulk of the cape. Parrish shivered as he looked at her.

All day the storm continued, the high wind sweeping the hard little pellets of snow out of the streets and into corners, like a hasty housekeeper cleaning up for company; and when he opened the door of

his apartment that evening and was greeted by the pleasant odour and cheerful crackle of burning logs, he had an inspiration.

"Ito," he said as he gave his servant the package of special coffee, "set a little table for dinner in the living room beside the fire."

After dressing, he came into that room, and critically surveyed the arrangement. "Excellent," he said to the Japanese, "except, instead of placing the lady opposite me you must seat her facing the fire."

To-night Rita surprised him by arriving ahead of time. He was aware of the fragrance of fresh air about her as he took her sable cape, and as Ito carried the garment to the other room he did not waste the opportunity. Her cheek felt like a rose fresh from the refrigerator of a florist.

Perceiving the table set by the fire, she exclaimed with pleasure, and, crossing, rested a slippered foot upon the fender, holding her hands toward the burning logs. On her wrist his bracelet sparkled splendidly, sending out needles of brilliance, red, green, and white. The wavering flames cast changing lights and shadows on her arms and face, and touched the folds of her black velvet gown with a mysterious rosy bloom.

A woman and a grate fire—Rita beside his hearth! He tingled with a sense of domesticity.

Ito came in with the cocktails; standing beside the table they touched glasses and drank; then as

Rita set down her glass she found the orchids at her place and held them against her gown. "But I won't put them on now," she said, laying them beside her plate. "I want them here where I can see them."

The dinner pleased her; with the enthusiasm of one playing truant from a diet she praised it, course by course.

"And this wine—delicious!" she said.

"The last quart of my 1908 Krug," he told her, gratified. "I've been saving it for a great occasion."

"It is nice of you to have made it this occasion, but you shouldn't have opened it for me. I don't need stimulation."

"If you mean you don't need it this evening," he returned playfully, "I could distill a compliment out of that."

"Help yourself."

As Ito was in the kitchen he mischievously chose to place his own construction on the invitation; whereupon she feigned a great demureness, singing:

"Je ne savais que dire, et j'ai rougi d'abord."

"Yes," he said, greatly pleased with himself because he recognized the fragment from "Faust";—"but Marguerite was early Victorian. I prefer Louise's idea of love. Marguerite is a wax doll in a blonde wig. She's so good and so pathetic. Instead of being victimized she should have married some worthy burgher and become the mother of a happy family."

"Let's send her out boat riding in the park with Lohengrin," said Rita.

"All right, but Louise—she's the one I'm interested in. She stands out from other operatic heroines as you do from other women. Her poet may quarrel with her later on, but she'll never bore him. If they quarrel it'll be because he's jealous of her."

"Yes," she agreed, "Louise isn't an easy lady to hold. Undoubtedly she'll tire of him. And when she does, let's give her a career. Let's have her take up with Lieutenant Pinkerton and then, when he's fallen madly in love with her, pay him off for jilting Madame Butterfly by eloping with Parsifal."

"By all means," he agreed. "An affair with Louise would be a good thing for Parsifal. It would teach him something about life."

Over their coffee and liqueur they laughed together. As they rose he lighted a cigarette. Rita picked up her orchids and moving to the piano tried it with an arpeggio.

"A good tone," she remarked, as if she had not expected it.

"You're surprised?"

"A little," she said, seating herself and laying the orchids on the music rack.

"May I ask why?"

"Oh—bachelors' pianos." She spoke airily.

"What do you know about bachelors' pianos?"

Rita laughed.

"They're apt to be like their owners—a little battered," she said. "Give me a cigarette."

"Excuse me. I thought you smoked only to tease Busini." He hastened to offer his case.

"This time," she answered as he gave her a light, "it's because your dinner was too good."

After a few puffs at the cigarette she laid it down and began to modulate softly from key to key.

"Some friends brought a Southern girl to my house the other day," she told him as she played. "They wanted me to hear her. She had some negro songs—the real thing. Have you ever heard that plantation song, 'All God's Children Got Shoes'? And she did some modern ones—blues—very funny. Of course I can't sing so soon after dinner, but——" She played an accompaniment and began, half reciting:

"I got de blues and I'm too darn mean to cry—"
ending with:

"Some people say dose weary blues ain't bad.
It's jus'de wuss ole feelin' dat I evuh had!"

Now and then she would glance up at Parrish as he leaned on the piano, and there was an amused expression in her eyes which told him she was taking a childish delight in doing something so remote from her usual repertoire.

"I've been teaching it to Frémecourt," she said as she ended. "You ought to hear him try to get

the negro dialect." Then with sudden enthusiasm: "There's an idea! I'll give a party and have him sing some of these songs. We'll call it a week from to-night—unless you hear from me to the contrary." She rose from the piano. "Now what about those treasures you were going to show me?"

He led her about, keeping close to her as he exhibited the portraits and the more important pieces of furniture from Blenkinswood: the Gilbert Stuarts, the Sully, the St. Memins; the Duncan Phyfe dining table, sideboard and chairs; the old silver punch-bowl; the Lowestoft china; the card table at which Washington had played when visiting Blenkinswood; the armchair of his host, a signer of the Declaration; and the Chinese Chippendale clock ordered out from England by Parrish's three-times-great-grandfather Blenkin. There were letters about that clock—written in the old gentleman's distinguished hand, in ink now brown with age, on sheets of handmade paper. Parrish had found them in a chest in the attic of the plantation house and had sent the most interesting specimens to an expert who had reënforced them with silk at their worn folds, and mounted them in portfolios, along with steel engravings of the venerable house and of several of his ancestors.

The table having been removed from beside the fire, and the couch pushed back to its usual position, Parrish brought the old papers from the library and seating himself beside Rita, placed the first port-

folio in her lap, turning the sheets for her and explaining as he went along.

They had looked at a number of letters and had come to an engraving showing the house "with its new wing, added in 1791," when the old clock slowly boomed the hour. It was ten.

"What day is this?" suddenly demanded Rita.

"Tuesday."

"But—the date?"

"March first. What's the matter?"

"The first!" she exclaimed, starting to her feet. The open portfolio slipped from her lap to the floor, the papers scattering on the rug, but she seemed not to notice them. "Heavens! I've had a feeling all evening— Now I *have* done it! A dinner in my honour to-night—at the Krausses'!"

"Oh, that's too bad," said Parrish, relieved. From her agitation he had feared it might be something worse. "Yes, it's too bad. But"—he shrugged—"well, you simply weren't there, that's all."

"But you don't understand! It's terribly important! If it weren't for Hermann Krauss there wouldn't *be* any opera! For heaven's sake get me my wrap! I must rush right up there!"

"Nonsense! It would be half-past ten when you arrived—they'd be going home. And your car—where's your car?"

She was near the door. Now she walked swiftly back, stepping on one of the papers.

"Don't argue!" she cried, clenching her two fists.

"Quickly! Get my cape! And a taxi! I must get there if I have to walk in the snow!"

In spite of his reluctance he was stirred to action by her vehemence. Slowly, resentfully, he moved toward his room, where the sable cape lay on his bed. But his pace did not suit her.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she cried, following on his heels.

A fine ending, this, for their evening! Before picking up the cape he turned to make a last appeal.

"For God's sake, Rita," he began, "have a little sense! How can you——"

"Will—you—*burry*?" she cried shrilly.

He took up the cape and flung it around her. Then in a paroxysm of angry longing he seized her in his arms and covered her face with savage kisses.

"There's no time for this!" Her voice was smothered. She pushed away from him, beating with one fist upon his chest.

He let her go.

"Damn you," he muttered, "you drive me crazy!" She rushed from the room.

"Wait!" he called after her. "Give me a chance to get my hat and coat, anyway!"

"You don't need to come! I don't need you!" The words streamed back to him as she raced toward the outer door.

He ran to the hall, seized his coat, and struggling into it as he went, joined her in the corridor, where

she was waiting for the elevator. She did not look at him. They did not speak.

The doorman hailed a passing taxi. As it stopped it skidded in a pocket of snow beside the curb. Parrish, endeavouring to help her in, had only a sense of the sweep of fur upon his finger tips.

"I don't need you!" she reiterated from the darkness within.

"Get over!" he said roughly, and after giving the driver the address he shoved his way through the narrow door and slammed it shut.

At the end of their short, silent drive he alighted, ceremoniously assisted her across the walk and rang the doorbell. Then, as a footman opened the inner door, he lifted his hat and gave her a stiff good-night.

"Good-night," she replied pleasantly. And as she passed in she added over her shoulder, "Good-night, Bruin!"

He got back into the taxi and drove home. His feet were cold and wet; snow had leaked in over the edges of his pumps. It would serve her right if he got pneumonia and died.

His apartment was still redolent of her. When with her he had never noticed that she used perfumery, but now that she was gone the place was haunted by her ghostlike fragrance. The cheerful fire was a mockery. He went to his bedroom to change his pumps, and crossing the floor kicked something with his foot. It proved to be a gold

mesh bag with a diamond-studded frame. Undoubtedly it had valuable contents. She would worry about it. Let her, then! He put it in his safe. If she wanted to find out about it she could telephone!

In his slippers he returned to the living room. The Blenkinswood portfolio and its contents still lay upon the rug where she had dropped them; his indignation flamed anew as he got down to pick them up. Such frail old papers! She could so easily have laid them aside! One of the Signer's letters had been torn in falling; and in the centre of the engraving showing Blenkinswood "with its new wing, added in 1791," was the ruinous imprint of a sharp little French heel.

Having gathered the papers he sat down on the sofa to arrange them in their proper order.

The fact of the matter was that Rita hadn't been interested in them. He saw that clearly now. She had been bored. Her attention had wandered. That was how she came to remember her engagement at the Krausses'. Bored with these things! Priceless old Americana! Bored with Blenkinswood—his house! Alice wouldn't have been bored! She was always asking him to show her those portfolios.

With a tenderness he had never before felt for them he carried the portfolios to the library and laid them in their place. Rita had only looked into the library; there he seemed for a moment to elude her,

but upon his return to the living room that subtle scent again assailed his nostrils. Maddening! He must get it out of here. Cold though it was, he would open a window.

Passing the piano on his way to the window he stopped short. The orchids! He picked them up. Already they were drooping.

The window was frozen shut; he had to hammer with both hands at the sash to open it. When it did open it flew up because of the momentum from his final blow, and a great gust of freezing air burst in, snapping the window shade and setting the draperies awirl. With his left hand he seized the agitated curtains, holding them aside. Then, drawing back, he poised himself and hurled the orchids out into the icy blackness.

Women! They talked of love! What did they know about love? Devotion? Oh, yes, they'd accept plenty of that, and plenty of everything else, too! But when it came to reciprocating—showing some consideration for a man—they simply weren't there! The least little thing—an engagement or anything—would set them flying off at a tangent. They were a lot of unreliable, luxury-loving, selfish pussycats! Give them a cozy cushion by the fire and they'd purr for a while, but just when you began to trust them they'd sink their claws in you. Women!

Sullenly he closed the window, put out the lights, and went into his bedroom.

CHAPTER XXII

THE Bement baby had arrived while Parrish was in Chicago, and now Bement, craving diversion after his sufferings in paternity, suggested to his partner that they make a night of it in town, going to a show and later to the Midnight Frolic. Of course it would have been nice if Mrs. Bement had been well enough to join them, but she and the baby were getting on all right, and the father really needed to get away from that house and those tiresome trained nurses.

The proposal, finding Parrish in the bitter mood in which he had been left by Rita's abrupt exodus from his apartment, appealed to him. He, too, had suffered. Two nights of white horror. His fatigue instead of inducing sleep expressed itself in a gnawing restlessness. Moreover, his apartment had become hateful to him—for the ghosts which haunt us most persistently are not those of the dead. The perfume of Rita was gone, but something of her lingered; he was continually aware of her gold mesh bag in his safe, and of her photograph upon his mantelpiece. That photograph picked itself out for him in the room as if a spotlight shone upon it; he had a thought of removing it but felt a curious embarrassment about

doing so; to remove it would be to admit that he had reversed himself, and he was not ready to admit that. Damn her! She drove him crazy!

In his need for comfort his thoughts turned to Alice, as those of one in trouble turn to a neglected deity; he gazed for a long time at her photograph upon his desk, but that photograph disturbed him, too, though in a different way. Strange, there seemed to be a look of sadness in the eyes. Why had she not answered his letter? He was beginning to feel hurt by her neglect.

He wrote and told her so.

On Thursday afternoon the partners came uptown together to Parrish's apartment, where Bement and his suitcase were duly installed. As men will when their nerves need soothing, they dined at a Broadway restaurant where there was continuous dancing and jazz music. In the play which they subsequently attended, a fat comedian, the victim of unjust suspicion, was obliged to hide under the bed of a pretty but virtuous lady whose husband was jealous of her. The comedian's chief humorous effect was achieved when he crawled from under the bed like a turtle and wistfully eyed the audience. This he did three times, and the play was over, leaving Parrish and Bement free to continue on their round of gayeties.

Through the after-theatre crowds they slowly worked their way to Forty-second Street, and passing into the wide corridor of the New Amsterdam

Theatre, entered the elevator. Within, a little group was already waiting for the car to ascend, and among them Parrish recognized Sam Burke, who bowed to him; then as those within the elevator stirred to admit newcomers he saw behind Burke the latter's wife and Clara Proctor. He advanced toward Clara and was about to ask if she had heard from Alice when her stiff little nod stopped him; and as if further to repel him she turned and began to converse with Mrs. Burke.

He was surprised. Though he did not like Clara and was aware of her dislike for him, hitherto as if by tacit understanding they had been carefully polite to each other. Well, if she did not wish to continue the effort he was satisfied, though he thought it stupid of her to reveal so plainly what he considered to be a jealousy of his hold on Alice.

All evening Parrish remained in a sardonic mood, and when after returning to the apartment the partners sat up for a time over their highballs, talking, Bement found himself amazed at the acidity of the other's observations upon women, life, and love. Though he had known Parrish since their college days he had not before realized him to be a misogynist. It must have been coming over him gradually. Bement had never been able to understand why Parrish did not marry, but this, he thought, explained it. A protracted bachelorhood was to him incomprehensible—the world was so full of lovely girls, and married life, in his experience, so happy. He and

his wife had long harboured a secret hope of finding the right girl for Parrish, but he now concluded that the fulfillment of such a hope was, if still a possibility, exceedingly remote.

Next morning at breakfast, however, after Parrish had drunk his coffee and—what was infinitely more important, had Bement known it—read his mail, he was noticeably more cheerful.

The junior partner commented upon this.

"It worried me," he said, "to hear you so cynical last night."

"What did I say that was cynical?"

"About women."

"Oh, no," returned Parrish brightly, "you're wrong, old man. I'm not that way at all. All I meant was—you've got to keep them in their place. There's nothing especially cynical about that, and certainly there's nothing new about it." He went on: "Everybody knows it, but when a man's in love he sometimes hasn't sense enough to put it into practice. If a woman does something he doesn't like he should ignore her for a while. It does them good."

It was the note from Rita, lying beside his coffee cup, that had made concrete in his mind the truth of this old dictum. For two days he had ignored her, and behold the result: she had used the mesh bag as an excuse to write an apologetic note, reminding him to bring it when he came to her house on Tuesday to hear Frémecourt sing the negro songs.

Shrewdly he surmised that if the truth were known she was a little bit afraid he wouldn't come at all. Well, let her be afraid! It wouldn't hurt her to worry for a while!

That day he took the mesh bag with him to the office, wrapped and sealed it, and sent it to her by a confidential clerk. She would look for a note in the package—a reply to hers. When she didn't find it, that would give her something to think about! Throughout the day he dwelt with malicious pleasure on the thought of her looking in vain for that letter, but by the next day he had begun to wonder if, considering the circumstances, he had not been a little too severe with her. After all, she had apologized; he didn't want to be ungentlemanly.

As for her having left so suddenly the other night, though it was frightfully annoying, he had to admit (upon reflecting) that any one might forget an engagement. He had done it himself. He remembered the time, long ago at Bar Harbor, when he had forgotten to go to a tea-party given in his honour. And Alice, when he first knew her, had forgotten an engagement she had with someone else, and gone out with him; certainly Alice was never intentionally careless about other people's feelings; he remembered how upset she had been.

For another day he thought the matter over; then he wrote briefly to Rita, accepting her apology. But he wasn't going to make it too easy for her—he didn't say definitely that he was coming to her party

on Tuesday. "I am very busy," he wrote, "but will come if I can."

When Tuesday night arrived he made up his mind that he would go. He was purposely late, however. She was surprised and happy when he came in; he could have seen that, even if she had not spoken of it.

She left some people and came halfway across the room to meet him, saying, "Oh—I wasn't certain I was going to see you to-night."

"I couldn't be sure," said he.

"I'd have been awfully sorry if you hadn't come," she said. "Frémecourt is just going to sing some of those negro songs."

She led him about, introducing him to those of her guests he had not met. The room was filled; fully half the people present were famous in the world of music: Cassoli, the cellist; Seevagen and his young rival of the violin, Heimann; Paldowski, the great Polish pianist, with his air of amiable aloofness and his soft aureole of gray hair, talking with Schoen and Elena Cordoba, the musical sensation of the year; Wildenstein, the symphony conductor; Liebmann, the music publisher; the Krausses, Bickfords, Stickels, Langdons, and others whose bank accounts vouchsafed them the privilege of association with the artists; and of course Larry Merrick and the inevitable Mrs. Fernis.

The ludicrous endeavours of the vast Frémecourt to impersonate an American negro, handicapped as he was by his French accent, delighted the assembly,

and seemed particularly to appeal to the melancholy Paldowski, who presently sat at the piano and played the basso's accompaniments. Meanwhile, there were mysterious departures to the dining room, where a gay conspiracy was evidently being hatched, and when Frémecourt stopped singing there came a great tumult, followed by the appearance of a burlesque German band made up impartially of musicians and millionaires wearing paper caps and playing imitation instruments of papier-mâché, from which they evoked sounds by singing into them. When the band, led by the famous baton of Wildenstein, had frightfully played several numbers, it marched gravely out again, syncopating something dimly recognizable as the most mournful of Chopin's compositions. Like the music, the storm of applause which followed was burlesque.

Mrs. Fernis bustled toward Rita.

"Dearie," she demanded, calling half across the room, "where's the young genius you promised us?"

Rita looked at the clock and shrugged.

"That's what I've been wondering," she answered.

"I do hope he is not going to disappoint me. But he is an uncertain quantity—un vrai type, I assure you."

Parrish, standing near, was looking at her, wondering if he knew of whom she was speaking, when she, catching his eye, seemed to catch as well the question in his mind, for she added, "Mr. Parrish can tell you what a gifted young man he is." There was a mis-

chievous gleam in her glance. "Mr. Parrish discovered him." And to him she explained parenthetically: "I am speaking of Delaney."

With that she turned quickly away and engaged in conversation elsewhere, leaving him at the mercy of the inquisitorial lady, to extricate himself as best he could.

"How very interesting!" she exclaimed. "And where did you find him, Mr. Parrish?"

"I didn't find him at all," he answered shortly. Then fearing she would think him rude he continued, "Rita's just being playful. It was she who found him. I had nothing to do with it."

"But who is he?"

"That I really don't know," he returned dismissively.

"I heard dear Rita when she sang his songs in concert a week or so ago," the lady went on.

"Then," returned Parrish, "you know more about him than I do. I was out of town."

"He accompanied her, you know."

He nodded.

"There's something interesting about him—so young—and so good-looking, don't you think so?"

Parrish, wondering how Rita could put up with such a woman, said he did think so.

A moment later, as he was speculating on a means of escape from Mrs. Fernis, he saw Delaney enter the room. He was in evening dress and looked very well in it, though obviously the suit was not made by

a good tailor. With some surprise he noticed that the young man appeared perfectly at ease. He paused inside the door and looked about the room; then, seeing Rita, strolled over and with that detached air of his, greeted her.

"Excuse me, I must go and speak to him," Parrish said to Mrs. Fernis, thinking he saw his opportunity.

But, "I'll go with you," said the lady. "His looks fascinate me. So Hellenic! I want to meet him."

Silently he escorted her across the room to where a little group was gathering around Rita and the new arrival.

"Of course you remember Mr. Parrish," Rita reminded Delaney.

"Oh, yes," he answered vaguely. "How do you do?"

"How do you do?" responded Parrish. He held out his hand, and when the other had given it an elusive pressure, presented him to Mrs. Fernis, identifying her by saying: "Mrs. Grace Etheridge Fernis, you know." Then as no light of recognition showed in Delaney's face he made a further effort to assist him, adding: "Of course you've read 'Sifting Sands'?"

"*'Shifting Sands,'*" corrected Mrs. Fernis quickly.

"Well, anyway, I haven't read it," announced Delaney.

"He reads nothing but the Russians," Rita hastened to explain; and to Delaney: "When you get

through with those eight volumes of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' you really must read Mrs. Fernis. One can't be au courant without reading her."

While she was speaking the young man looked at her with a curious intentness that was characteristic of him. It was as if he were listening with his eyes.

"I see," he answered indefinitely. Then after a glance about the room he asked, "Isn't that Wildenstein—that man over there?"

"Yes," Rita answered. "Come over and meet him."

But Delaney did not move.

"I was just wondering," he said ruminatively, "why he took the third movement of the Tschaïkowsky Fifth so slowly the other day."

Rita gave a little shuddering laugh.

"Well, don't you go and ask him that!"

"Certainly not. But just the same he ought to stick to Beethoven and Brahms. He hasn't the temperament to do Tschaïkowsky."

Again she laughed.

"Since Wildenstein doesn't measure up," she said, "let us see if we can't find someone here who will. Would you care to know Paldowski?"

"Yes, I'd be glad to meet him."

"That," said she, her eyes brimming with amusement, "is probably as great a tribute as he ever received—though perhaps he wouldn't know it."

Some late guests entered and she crossed the room to welcome them.

"Isn't she beautiful to-night!" frothed Mrs. Fernis, looking after her. "I never saw her in that type of frock before, did you? It makes her look so girlish—so demure."

Perhaps because of the failure of her effort to converse with Delaney she looked at Parrish.

He had remarked the gown. It was the "sympathetic" shell-pink gown she had ordered on the day he met her at the dressmaker's. He did not mention that, however.

Delaney was gazing after Rita. Now he spoke.

"Yes," said he, almost as if talking to himself, "it's beautiful."

Mrs. Fernis had evidently gathered that praise from Delaney was praise indeed, for when Rita returned she said to her, "Mr. Delaney has been admiring your dress."

"Really?" She looked at him. "Have you?"

"Yes."

"Then," she said half jestingly, "this is a red-letter day for me. I had about abandoned hope of ever extorting a compliment from you."

The young man flushed and looked confused. After a moment's hesitation he said gravely: "Why, surely you know I admire you very much."

Though he had spoken before all three of them and though apparently he had made only a conventional remark, Parrish had a curious sense of having overheard something he was not meant to hear. He felt a little bit embarrassed; and so, evidently, did

Mrs. Fernis, for with the manner of one who has by accident intruded, she turned to him, saying: "I'm simply famished, aren't you? Let's go and get some supper."

As they moved together toward the dining room she asked:

"Doesn't he strike you as being a very singular young man?"

For once Parrish found himself in full accord with her.

"He strikes me as being all of that," said he.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER supper, when all were in the drawing room again, Delaney played a suite of three compositions called "In a Picture Gallery," which Rita announced he had just completed. In it he attempted a musical expression of the emotions created by three paintings. The first represented one of Monet's canvases—water lilies in the painter's garden at Giverny; the second a portrait by Whistler, the third a Spanish market place by Ernest Lawson. The music, like the paintings portrayed, was impressionistic, and Parrish, quickly deciding that he did not think much of it, entertained himself, while Delaney played, by looking about the room, observing in more detail the heterogeneousness of its contents. Almost in a single glance he saw an ancient Spanish desk, tall and bulky, studded with nails and strapped with ornamental ironwork; a Chinese cabinet of red lacquer; and another cabinet of buhl. A semicircular Heppelwhite table stood against the wall between the French windows, and in the next wall space a Korean chest of dark polished wood, heavily bound with brass. The massive table backed against the blue velvet couch at the centre of the room was an old Italian piece, and upon it were

two lamps made from Chinese bowls; but the several tall standing lamps of carved and gilded wood were Florentine. He noted also a light Sheraton sofa, French and American chairs of several different eras, and a stiff Italian throne and footstool covered with old velvet and embroidered with the arms of the Borghese.

Over the finely carved marble mantelpiece hung a full-length portrait of the mistress of the house, sweepingly painted and very strong in colour, and elsewhere on the walls were a Flemish tapestry, a florid, Rubens-like canvas depicting nymphs surprised by a faun, an old Italian mirror with a massive gilded frame, the brocaded robe of a Noh dancer, and several modern American landscapes.

His cataloging of the museumlike collection stopped with Delaney's playing, and he was astonished when the musicians gathered around the young composer and congratulated him with an enthusiasm apparently quite genuine.

Rita seemed much pleased.

"Now let me sing you one of his new songs," she said, and immediately the room became quiet.

Parrish liked the song better than the piano composition; it had a melody, and the words—an old poem by Samuel Lover—were humorous:

*"Ob, 'tis time I should talk to your mother,
Sweet Mary," says I;
"Ob, don't talk to my mother," says Mary,
Beginning to cry——*

and after a rejection by Mary of a like suggestion in regard to her father:

*"Then how shall I get you, my jewel?
Sweet Mary," says I;
"If your father and mother's so cruel,
Most surely I'll die!"
"Oh, never say die, dear," says Mary;
"A way now to save you I see;
Since my parents are both so contrary—
You'd better ask me!"*

As an encore Rita sang Delaney's arrangement of "Bonnie Doon," but Parrish was aware of the song only as a background for his thoughts.

So that "Sweet Mary" song was new, eh? He had noticed music manuscript on the piano, yet neither of them had used it. Rita knew the words and music by heart. How new was the song? How long had it taken her to learn it? Of course she was a quick study, but just when had she learned it? He wished he knew just when, and just how long it had taken. Delaney had come late; that showed they hadn't rehearsed this evening, anyway. When, then? Somehow he didn't like the idea of their rehearsing there together, alone. The first thing Rita knew Delaney would begin to misunderstand her interest in his music. After all, he was just a piano tuner; he had no advantages, no breeding. And he read the Russians—the rotten Russians!

He wondered if Delaney had been in town ever since that night he had seen him outside the opera

house. It looked that way. He had said in Atlantic City that he couldn't afford to come to New York at all; but he had come, and now apparently he was hanging around. Had the music publishers and the Discaphone people advanced him money? Were they in the habit of advancing money to unknown composers? He didn't believe so. Young composers were traditionally poor; if funds had been advanced it must have been because of Rita's influence, and it was not proper for a woman to use her influence in that way for a man. Not that sort of man, anyway. He would have to speak to her about it to-night, when the guests had gone.

After singing, Rita summoned Schoen to exhibit to Paldowski, Frémecourt, and some of the others his tricks at the piano with an orange and hairbrush, and he in turn was followed by Wildenstein, who played his own elaboration of a Strauss waltz.

"He is very vain of playing the piano so well, in addition to conducting," Mrs. Fernis whispered to Parrish. She seemed to set great store by these little titbits of gossip about the musical celebrities.

Already some of the guests had left, and now, as it was nearly one o'clock, a more general exodus began. Soon only Parrish, Mrs. Fernis, Frémecourt and Delaney remained. Frémecourt was a notorious night owl and Mrs. Fernis was almost as notorious a hanger-on. But why didn't Delaney go?

Leaving the others gathered around the piano,

where Frémecourt was humming "Bonnie Doon," Rita drew Parrish aside.

"I haven't seen you in days," she said, "and to-night I'd counted on a little visit with you, but"—she gave her shrug—"you see how it has been?" She ran on: "Aside from that, I do think the party has been a success, don't you? I mean, it's done Delaney good—they liked him—don't you think so?"

"They seemed to," he replied magnanimously. "Does he expect to be in New York long?"

"Yes, he's really getting launched. Liebmann is publishing 'Bonnie Doon', you know, and he said to-night that he would bring out 'Sweet Mary' and 'In a Picture Gallery.'"

"That's all right," Parrish returned, "but what I'm wondering is: how can Delaney afford to stick around New York all this time? You know in Atlantic City he told us——"

"Oh, it's dear of you to be worrying about that!" she put in, laying her hand with what seemed to be an impulsive gesture upon his arm, and raising her eyes, warm with what looked like gratitude, to his. "Thanks, just the same, though—it's all been fixed."

"So I judged," said he.

"It isn't as if it were only sheet music," Rita continued. "There's the Discaphone. There'll be lots of money for him in that when he gets started. I'm going to sing 'Sweet Mary' for them to-morrow, and next week I'm——"

"Of course," he interrupted, "you've done won-

ders for him. That goes without saying. If it weren't for you he'd still be going around Atlantic City in his old checked cap—tuning pianos. No question about that. Probably all the rest of his life. But, Rita, there's another side of this thing, and you——”

She looked quickly at the others.

“Sh-h!” she warned. “Come over here.” Again laying her hand upon his sleeve she drew him farther from the group at the piano. Then lowering her voice to a confidential tone: “There's something I want you to do for me, dear. You can help me a lot if you will.”

Her gaze was earnest and appealing. He nodded.

“Frémecourt will simply never go home,” she whispered, “nor Grace Fernis. I'm always having to send those two away. I must get them out pretty soon. I have to practice those songs, and——”

He broke in with: “You mean alone?”

“No, of course not. With Delaney.”

He stared at her.

“Let me get this right. You mean—what you want me to do—you want me to go—is that it—and take them, and leave you with Delaney?”

She assented.

“Oh, you do!” he said roughly, his rage mounting. “You do, do you? Well, you guess again!” She looked at him fixedly, without speaking, while he continued in a tone poisonously sarcastic: “No, my dear, you've got it wrong this time! I'm not

the one who's going! It's your little friend Delaney. Do you see? And what's more——" His voice was rising.

"Don't make a row!" she broke in sharply. "Don't you see they're listening!"

He glanced toward the piano, catching Mrs. Fernis's eyes fixed upon them. Hastily she looked away.

"What do I care!" he exclaimed. "If you don't want them to listen get them out! There are some things you and I are going to settle right here, to-night. I'm going to have a talk with you now if it's my last!"

"All right!" she flashed, "on that basis——" And leaving him abruptly she moved toward the others.

Mrs. Fernis, however, met her halfway.

"Rita, dear," she announced, "Frémecourt and I have just been saying we must go. It's getting scandalously late."

Quickly Rita spoke to Delaney.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but we'll have to put off practising the songs. Come to-morrow morning about ten o'clock, will you?"

Standing at some distance from the door Parrish exchanged bows and good-nights with the three. As he watched Delaney go he thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and planted his feet more firmly on the rug, trying half consciously to assume the posture of a host. It gave him a sense of triumph to do that.

Ushering them out Rita pressed a push button near the door, and simultaneously a bell sounded faintly from a distant part of the house. Parrish heard her clear voice bidding them good-night. From where he stood he could see her leaning over the balustrade looking after them. Presently he heard the soft metallic sound of the front door closing behind them.

Rita called down to the butler: "Pierre!"

"Mademoiselle?" He came running up.

"Laissez la lumière là-bas." And in English she added: "Monsieur will be going presently. I'll ring."

"Bien, mademoiselle. Merci." He descended toward the lower hall.

"If it was as a precaution that you told Pierre to sit up," Parrish said with a contemptuous little laugh, "it was quite unnecessary. I wish I were the kind of man who can take a woman and drag her around by the hair. It's what you need! Evidently you know it, too! But you can set your mind at rest—you won't have to ring for help."

She, too, laughed.

"Oh, you're Anglo-Saxon," she retorted lightly, "so I wasn't worrying. It's a little courtesy, that's all. Doesn't it seem fitting that I should have you shown out with due ceremony when probably you'll be leaving for the last time?"

The flippancy hurt him as no display of anger could have.

"So," he said, "that's all this whole thing has meant to you, is it?" She was at the other end of the room; he took a few steps toward her. "If my going doesn't mean any more than that to you I might as well go now."

"I was only striking back," she said quickly. "Don't let's go on like this. Let's sit down and talk things over." She crossed, rang the bell again, and returning took a chair, indicating to him a place upon a near-by couch, where he sat in silence until Pierre reappeared.

"You were up late last night," Rita said to the butler. "I will see monsieur to the door."

"I thank mademoiselle." He bowed and retired. Parrish listened to the sound of his footfalls on the staircase.

"Well?" she invited.

"Do you think there's no end to what I can stand," he asked her, "or is it that you just don't give a damn?"

"Certainly I 'give a damn.' Do you think if I weren't fond of you I'd be here now?"

"Oh, I suppose you are 'fond' of me," he returned dryly. "I think one may fairly assume that much. It seems strange now that I didn't see, all along, that with you it was nothing more than a slight fondness. Looking back, everything has pointed that way. But I just couldn't see it—or wouldn't. Naturally, I didn't want to see it, caring for you as I do. Oh, what a fatuous idiot I've been!"

"Caring for me as you do?" she echoed. "And just how much do you think you do care?"

The implication of doubt as to the depth of his feeling for a moment stupefied him.

"If I haven't shown you," he answered, "I guess there's no way for me to tell you now."

"But," she demanded quickly, "if a man loves a woman very deeply doesn't he ask her to marry him?"

Marriage! Was that it, then? Was that what she had been thinking of all this time? Here was a situation! He had never explained to Rita, as he had to Alice, that he was not a marrying man. The topic had never suggested itself and he had never thought of bringing it up. It had not seemed necessary. Rita was such a different type. But women! You never could tell about a woman!

Her eyes were fixed upon his face.

"You mean," he said slowly, "you mean that—you—want—me—to marry—you?"

"No," she answered, speaking quite as slowly as he, and looking at him with a comical solemnity which he recognized for a burlesque of his own expression, "I don't mean—anything—of—the—kind."

He felt the hot blood in his face.

"Oh," he said, "then this is just a debating society!"

At once she became earnest.

"No, it's not," she answered, "and I shouldn't have done that. I can see how my question about

marriage misled you. I asked it because I wanted to show you that you aren't so deeply in love with me as you may have thought yourself."

"Well, it doesn't show me anything of the kind," said he. "The reason I've not asked you to marry me is the same reason I've not asked anybody else. I intend to remain a bachelor. I've never intended to marry."

At that she smiled a little.

"There, at all events," she told him, "we are perfectly in accord. I don't blame you for wanting to remain a bachelor. I wouldn't marry the most fascinating man alive. In my case, of course, it is more than just an inclination. Opera singers ought not to marry—the women, anyway. You can't serve God and mammon, and you can't serve your art and hot rolls for breakfast."

"A lot of them *are* married, though," said he.

"Yes, and I know just two who are really happy. They're the exceptions that prove the rule. But look at Prenslauer—her career is ruined; she lost her voice when she had her last baby. And most of the others have either got divorces or accepted their husbands' love affairs."

There had been growing upon him a disturbing sense of having been led, against his will, into an abstract discussion. He had not stayed here to talk of Prenslauer's baby or the troubles of singers with their husbands.

"This is all very interesting," he said, rising and

taking a few restless steps, "but it's not getting us anywhere."

"Well, then," she replied amiably enough, "what is it you want?"

He stopped walking and looked down at her.

"I want to know exactly where I stand with you," said he.

Her eyes met his.

"That's just what I've been wondering," she said.

"You don't know?"

"I thought I knew, but——"

"Evidently!" he put in.

"—but there's such a difference between loving and being in love."

"Yes," he retorted, "and there's a difference between loving and hating! I ought to know! But that isn't getting us anywhere either."

"Being in love gets *me* somewhere," she insisted. "If one is not in love life is empty as an unfurnished house. I don't believe anybody who is not in love is really happy. The day I met you I was lonely—you attracted me. I was longing to be in love again. The day was like spring, if you remember."

"Do I!" he murmured with reminiscent fervour, and after a deep sigh resumed: "Then what you mean is—you were longing to fall in love with somebody—and now you're wondering whether you really did or not."

"That's a crude way of putting it," said she, "but love means more to me than it does to some people."

He seated himself near her, leaning forward, and was about to speak when in a reflective tone she supplemented: "When I'm in love I sing better."

The words struck him like a blow.

"My God!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Talking of love as if it were a gargle!"

Rita burst out laughing.

"Well, anyway," she declared, "I love you for that!"

"But that isn't what I want to be loved for!" he protested. "And I don't want intermittent love—one day on a pinnacle, next day in the ditch. I'm worn out with your eternal changeableness. It's nearly killing me! This thing is going to be definitely settled to-night! I'd rather——"

"There you are!" she broke in. "That's just it! That's going to help me to explain to you. Do you remember on the way to Atlantic City you were talking about wanting to know all about me, wanting to make a portrait of me, as you put it? You kept talking about getting the portrait finished. Well, what happens when a portrait is finished? The painter has learned all he can about his subject. His job is done. The portrait is framed and hung upon a wall"—she waved her hand toward her own portrait above the mantelpiece—"to gather dust. And with a love affair it is the same. It is the development that is interesting—the gradual finding out. When that is over most love affairs are done. Not great ones, of course—but there aren't many great ones.

"You'd think," she continued, "that almost any one would understand a thing like that, but men seldom do. In love they go by instinct, and their instinct is wrong. They hunt love as naturalists hunt butterflies. They don't see the beauty of freedom and movement. They want to catch the butterfly, run a needle through it and mount it on a cork where they can investigate it microscopically. But by that time the butterfly is dead."

"If you mean that a man wants to be sure of the woman he loves," said Parrish, "of course he does! That's just the point—I've never been sure of you. I guess there must be a hole in my butterfly net!"

"Or perhaps the mesh isn't fine enough," said she, smiling.

At that he became angry again.

"Oh, to hell with this butterfly talk!" he exclaimed. "Generalities! What I want to know is—is there any use in my trying to go on, or am I through?"

"And that's what I've been endeavouring to tell you," she gave him back. "I know you want to pin me down, and I won't be pinned down. Love isn't an exact science; it's a fine art." And before he could break in she added: "And to be entirely frank—if you want me to be frank——"

"Yes, yes," he urged.

"Well, I am afraid you are not an artist. In love, at least, you lack the light touch."

Again he felt an impact as of a heavy fist. Of all conceivable charges, that was the last he had ever expected to hear made against him. And by a woman! She had the effrontery to say he lacked the light touch in love!—he, to whom men friends had so often come for advice in these matters; who had always handled situations of this kind so deftly; who, without being merciless, managed women; who, in his love affairs, had with invariable skill charted his course between the Scylla of loneliness and the Charybdis of responsibility! Preposterous! She was deliberately trying to confuse him. But she couldn't do it! He knew what had caused all the trouble. He had been feeling it all along, and now somehow he knew it. And he would tell her, too!

"It hasn't anything to do with a light touch," he said. "It hasn't anything to do with me. It's Delaney! Ever since you first saw that whelp you've been different!"

"Well," she returned, unperturbed, "what have you got against Delaney?"

"I hadn't planned to stay long enough to tell you," he answered bitterly, "but I'll tell you one thing I've got against him: he's not a gentleman."

"Perhaps not—as you mean it," she conceded without rancour. "I guess at that rate I'm not a lady, either. But Delaney is a good deal more than a gentleman. He's an artist."

"Am I to infer that an artist cannot be a gentleman?" His tone was triumphant.

"It has been known to happen," said she laconically.

"Anyway, his being an artist can hardly make him a novelty to you," he said. "Certainly you know plenty of them. And as an artist he's not in your class."

"There you're wrong," she answered. "He is more truly an artist than I am. In the first place, he creates instead of reproducing; and in the second, he loves music purely for itself, while I love it partly for what it can do for me."

"All right," he said; "granted you admire him. But you don't have to get sentimental about him, do you?"

"No, I don't have to, and I don't say I am sentimental about him; but if one must analyze, it might be interesting to have a man like that care for one even more than for his music."

"Yes, and you've been trying to make him care!" he charged.

"If I have, the effort has not been highly successful."

"You just fall in love with him," he prophesied vindictively, "and you'll get yours! He's a lot younger than you are. You can't hold him."

"I'm a good gambler."

"Maybe you are," he retorted, "but if you can hold him it will be the first case of that kind I've run across. I've seen dozens of them—where the woman was older—and I've never known it to fail. In the end he'll fall in love with some little girl young

enough to be your daughter, and where will you be then?"

"Playing tragic rôles as I never did before. I shouldn't wonder if that sort of bump would be good for me."

He sank back on the couch, his eyes staring unseeing across the room, his mind filled with a whirling misery. Presently she stirred a little in her chair, and he became aware of her again. She did look younger in that dress—almost girlish—grotesquely girlish for one capable of such a shocking stream of bizarre sophistications.

Slowly he rose and stood before her.

"Just like surgery—this—for—me," he said, and smiled.

And as he smiled the dryness of his lips against his teeth was painful. His whole mouth was dry. When he opened it again to speak his tongue made a little clicking sound against the roof of his mouth, which vaguely irritated him.

"Diagnosis—that's what I wanted. Now I know. It's better to know. Well, I'm ready to be wheeled out."

With that he swung around and made his way toward the door on legs that felt weak and numb.

He heard her make a little sound of pity—he didn't want her pity! Then her swift steps coming after him—he didn't want her following him!

"Don't come ' he said without turning. "I'll let myself out."

But she kept coming. He heard her behind him on the stairs. In the lower hall he almost ran to get his coat from the chest where it was lying. He did not pause to put it on, but threw it over his arm and, seizing his hat and cane, made for the door.

She was back of him; he felt her pulling at his coat. "Let me help you with it," he heard her say. Why didn't she stay upstairs as he told her to? She ought to know he wouldn't want her looking at him when he was like this!

As he reached for the doorknob she laid a detaining hand upon his outstretched arm. He dropped his arm abruptly and turned upon her.

"You leave me alone!" he heard himself say, and as she stepped back, looking startled, he realized that he had made a threatening gesture with his cane.

She was saying something as he shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOR the next few days Parrish was like a man drugged. He felt light-headed, and as he went about was continually on his guard against revealing it. But he made the office every day. Several times he was aware of Bement's surreptitious scrutiny, and it annoyed him. What if he was not looking very well? Was that anybody else's business as long as he attended to his job?

He was a little bit surprised that the pain was not greater. Though incessant, it was dull. Perhaps it would be worse when this drugged feeling wore off. His chief sensation was that of being crippled and not yet accustomed to it; of greatly missing some important portion of his body, which had been removed. His heart still was inside him, he could feel it pounding heavily; but he could not eat, and there were times when he feared to breathe deeply, lest it bring on the sharp pain.

But presently there came a day when he began to understand a little and, as recuperation advanced, to gather comfort from a wan philosophy.

Well, at all events, it was over. This surgery had from the first been inevitable. Ultimately, no doubt, he would be better for it; in one way, even, he was

better now—the uncertainty was gone; at last he could sleep.

As his mind cleared he found himself thinking of Alice. Not once during what now seemed to him to have been a period of illness through which he had passed, had he heard from her; and now instead of attributing her silence to the condition of her sister's health, or to annoyance with him because he had so long delayed writing to her, he began to be honest with himself and to search for deeper causes.

Could she have heard some rumour of what had been going on? At first that seemed to him hardly probable. She was far away, out of touch with New York and unacquainted with the people with whom he had lately been associating. And even those people, he liked to think, had for the most part been unaware of his affair with Rita. Busini had evidently suspected something, and perhaps the ubiquitous Mrs. Fernis had also, but he hardly thought there had been general gossip. Of course there was Atlantic City, but on that trip he had seen no one he knew. The people he knew would not be likely to go to that hotel.

The only friend of Alice's he had met since she left was Clara Proctor—at the Midnight Frolic—and then he had been with Bement. Clara, to be sure, had all but cut him. That still puzzled him a little. But he and Clara never had liked each other; she was always trying to come between him and Alice;—trying to inoculate Alice with her own cynicism con-

cerning men, advising her to drop him because he didn't mean to marry.

As he thought of that, there came to him the first glimmer of mirth—grim mirth—that he had known since Rita's door closed behind him. He had disliked Clara for interfering, but she was right: Alice should have dropped him; from a strategic standpoint it would have been the wise thing to do. But Alice hadn't any strategy.

Strategy was not very well distributed among women: some had none; others too much. Real fineness didn't count as it ought to in relations between men and women. Fine women, like Alice, lacking strategy or scorning to use it, so often lost out, while women who were cold-hearted and unscrupulous got everything their own way. Perhaps the fine ones could get some satisfaction out of knowing they were square and honest, but that seemed cold comfort.

Women! Why were people always generalizing about women? Such a stupid thing to do! Generalizations were stupid anyway. How true the epigram of the witty Frenchman who declared: "All generalizations are false—including this one!" When men generalized about women they were in reality describing not women, but their own reactions to some certain woman. If a man proclaimed women selfish, heartless, cruel, it was a safe conclusion that the woman he cared for had ill-used him; while if, upon the other hand, according to him they were patient,

loving, and forgiving, the woman he cared for was generous and kind.

During these days he reflected a great deal about women.

How helpless the average man against a woman pretty and unscrupulous! To a man it was well-nigh inconceivable that a woman's soul might not be so lovely as her face—that is, until she proved it to him. Given a beautiful face his romantic fancy would endow her with every admirable and endearing quality of character. Strange, too, that beauty and charm—or lure—qualities having not the slightest bearing upon worth—should be the two great magnets of the love attraction. That meant that the qualities to attract were not the qualities to hold love. Something wrong there. If things were right with love, men would, from the beginning, be drawn to women by their sweetness, their fair-mindedness, their capability, their loyalty, in short, their fineness, instead of learning later to appreciate those qualities if lucky enough to find them. Yet under the distorted laws governing the love attraction all those qualities—the qualities of a good wife—might often be found in women who, for lack of attributes superficially attractive, were almost certainly predestined to a state of spinsterhood.

The whole thing was a mess.

Take his own case: How horrible to realize that he had so easily been drawn away from what was beautiful and fine by what was beautiful but not fine;

how horrible that he could cast aside Alice's unselfish, unchanging love, for something hot, spasmodic, spurious; and how horrible that the loss of that brief meretricious love could plunge him into a wretched state in which, though lonely, he avoided people, returning each evening to his apartment like a sick dog crawling into his kennel.

Sitting by the fire in his living room one night, unable to interest himself in books or magazines, he tried to analyze his situation. Rita's photograph still stood upon the mantelpiece; for several days its presence there had been disturbing him but, as if for want of energy to move it, he had allowed it to remain. There, at all events, was something he was able to correct. He rose, took down the picture, and removed it from the silver frame.

His wretchedness was not a wretchedness of longing for Rita. He treasured no dream, however shadowy, of a renewal. He had put her—or she had put herself—definitely out of his life. Her destruction of his illusions, her blows upon his self-respect, made him detest her. If in the loss of her he missed anything it was a Rita he had imagined, a Rita who did not exist.

He looked at the photograph in his hands. She was beautiful with the beauty of a blue-ribbon cob exhibiting its gaits at a horse show. Proud, sleek, and sure, self-confident, self-centred, self-satisfied, the expression of her face, in the picture, irritated him.

Suddenly, violently, almost as if slashing at her, he

tore the photograph. He had aimed at the face, but by a narrow margin missed it. Again he tore, and this time the paper broke in a ragged line passing through one eye, across the nose and down the cheek. He threw the bits of the torn likeness at the fire, but they hit the screen and fell back upon the hearth. It was not unpleasant to scuff them into the hot ashes with the sole of his shoe. The silver frame he put away;—he could give it to the cleaning woman.

But now in this morass of misery he did long for Alice, and his longing for her was like his longing for his mother when as a boy he became ill away from home. There had always been that mother quality in Alice, that eternal watchfulness for his well-being; she was always thinking of him, worrying about him, afraid he would get tired or take cold. He thought with a strong nostalgia of the big comfortable chair in her apartment and the smoker's stand beside it: his chair, his stand, she called them.

And their tastes were so congenial—she always wanted to do what he wanted to; in restaurants she was delighted with what he ordered, and after dinner it was for him to decide what they should do—whether they should go to the theatre or back to her apartment, where he could be comfortable and smoke while they talked.

How he wished she were at her apartment now! It would be so comforting to go to her; she was so understanding when one was downhearted. When the market was at its worst, after the war, and brok-

erage houses were failing, he could always get encouragement from her. And that time he had the gripe—she came to see him every day. How well he remembered the way she used to fix his pillows! She did it better than the nurse.

Trifling things always pleased her so. When he gave her some little present she did not thank him only once; with her a present seemed to renew itself over and over, and she would speak of it again and again. She remembered everything: not only birthdays but the most trifling anniversaries.

That reminded him—he had been meaning to get a present for her birthday. Her birthday would be coming pretty soon. Let's see, when was it? It came in the middle of March—March fourteenth. And to-day was—March fourteenth! Her birthday was to-day—and to-day was nearly over!

He hastened to the telephone and put in a call for Alice. It was only a little after ten o'clock. That meant nine in Cleveland. How fortunate, how very fortunate, that he had thought of it in time!

While waiting in the library for the call to be put through he paced the rug, following the pattern with his feet. There was a place in the corner where he had to take a short step or else go over into the border. In the back of his mind was an incoherent wish that the rug had been a little shorter or a little longer, to match the length of his stride.

The knowledge that he was so soon to hear her voice made him happy in spite of his apprehension

as to what her attitude would be. Again he speculated on the cause of her silence. Suppose she had in some way found out about Rita—what would she say, and what could he say? However, he did not believe she had found out. It seemed far more likely that she was hurt by his neglect. But he wished he knew. It would be so much easier to commence talking with her if he knew. Why didn't the operator get her? Long-distance service ought to be prompt at this time of night. He was moving toward the telephone with the intention of asking for a report on his call, when the bell began to ring.

"All ready with Cleveland," said the operator.

"Hello—hello—hello," he called.

"Just a minute, please."

He waited. There came a little click and a soft electric hum upon the wire.

"Hello," he said again.

Then he heard Alice's voice, faint and far away.

"Hello—Alice. This is Dick." He paused; then as she did not answer he asked, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"I called up to wish you a happy birthday. I couldn't get your present off to you in time. I was wondering whether I'd better send it or hold it here until you get back. I suppose you will be coming back pretty soon, won't you?"

"I don't know."

"Why not? Is your sister no better?"

"She's much better, thank you."

"Is she back from Lake Placid yet?"

"We expect her next week."

"That's fine! And after that you'll be coming home?"

"I don't know," she said again, and there was something ominous to him about the repetition.

"But I want to know," he persisted. "You must have some idea when you'll be coming."

"I haven't made up my mind."

"Alice," he said, "I miss you awfully. You haven't even written to me. I know it's my fault—I ought to have written to you—but I was horribly busy just after you went away; I kept putting off writing from day to day, and after a while I felt so guilty about it I didn't know how to begin. And I haven't been feeling well. And last week I was called on the jury—I had a devil of a time getting off. I've been sitting here alone all evening, thinking about you. Came home tired out. Last night I stayed at home, too—and the night before—thinking about you. I'd give anything to see you. I do wish you were back."

He was not satisfied with what he had been saying; he felt that it did not sound genuine; he was throwing in words desperately, as if they had been bags of sand intended to stop leaks in a dike. Strangely, the flood he feared was not a flood of reproaches but of silence; and now as he waited, giving her a chance to answer, the silence began seeping through again, forcing him to throw in more words.

"Hello! Alice!"

"Yes?"

He hastened on: "I'm wretched about the way I've treated you! I know I've made you unhappy, and that makes me unhappy. Can't you say something to comfort me?"

Again that awful silence.

"Alice! Are you there?"

"Yes."

Some quality in her voice—he did not know just what—told him now that she was weeping.

"Can't you just say something to me?"

The electric singing of the wire suddenly stopped.

"Alice!"

No answer.

He worked the hook up and down and when the operator responded made nervous inquiries of her.

"Hold the wire, please." A curious little sound came through the receiver, telling him that the operator, like a disembodied spirit, was flying through the night to Cleveland to find out what was wrong; a moment later he heard her disembodied voice.

"The party disconnected," she informed him.

His first impulse was to call Alice again, but he abandoned the thought; there was no reason to suppose that further communication with her by telephone would be more satisfactory than the one-sided conversation just ended.

She had been crying; he was almost certain of it. Was it because she did not wish him to detect it that

she had hung up the receiver—or was this a dismissal? Her silences, her short replies, lent colour to the latter theory. She had never treated him like that before. If only she had reproached him instead of being silent, that would have shown him where he stood; but as things were, he knew no more than if he had not called her up at all.

What if he had lost her! Now for the first time he faced that possibility. He had relied upon her gentleness, her devotion, her forgiveness. Had he relied too much? Ruthlessly he had traded on her finest qualities, treating her as he would not have dared to treat a woman of coarser fibre. His ethics had been the ethics of the jungle. He had been considerate of Rita because he was afraid of her, and inconsiderate of Alice because of her he was not afraid.

Then, like a thunderbolt, the thought struck him that *he had treated Alice as Rita had treated him!*

Would he forgive Rita? Never!

Would Alice forgive him? She must forgive him! She must! He must find some way to make her forgive him. He deserved to lose her, but he could not bear to.

In the past he had been more aware of her need of him than of his need of her, but now their positions were reversed. He could not go on without her. He must win her back. He must see her. He would go at once to Cleveland.

Consulting a time-table he found that a train

left for Buffalo at eleven-ten. He could just make it. By changing cars at Buffalo to-morrow morning he could reach Cleveland in the early afternoon.

Through the pantry door he shouted to Ito, then ran to his own room and began collecting the things he wanted packed. When the servant came he left the filling of the bag to him and telephoned for a taxi. In fifteen minutes he was on his way to the station; in half an hour he was on the train; and when a little later he retired for the night the train was roaring along beside the Hudson River. But he could not see the river. There are no windows in an upper berth.

CHAPTER XXV

ALIGHT snow was falling when Parrish arrived in Cleveland next afternoon, but when, after a brief pause at a hotel, he took a taxicab to drive to Alice's, there was only dampness on the pavements where the snow had been.

Having passed through a busy district of retail shops, theatres, and office buildings, where it seemed to him pedestrians were too much given to crossing the streets recklessly in the middle of blocks, they came to an "auto row" made up of two- and three-story buildings of brick and tile, with here and there a mansion of an earlier day rearing its smoke-begrimed bulk in futile defiance of the outward march of trade. Then more old houses, ugly and massive, some of them well kept, telling of wealthy families still holding on, others turned into dressmakers' establishments, art shops, and boarding places. Around some of them was grass, and on the grass the snow had not melted, but held in a semi-transparent whitish glaze.

A few minutes farther out, at a trolley crossing, was a thriving centre—a small city within a large one—with banks, stores, and yellow taxis clustered around a railroad station; and after perhaps ten minutes

more, during which the cab traversed a section where apartment houses and business buildings seemed to be waging equal warfare with old houses, another secondary business centre, with its crosstown trolley line, banks, motion-picture theatres, and shops. Then a parked circle with a bronze statue and a little lake behind it, a boulevard winding amid snow-dusted trees and shrubbery, and presently, after a long and rather steep ascent, fine heights, on which stood large residences in spacious grounds, with here and there an apartment building sharply breaking the skyline. More winding along a parked way: this one double with street-cars running down the middle and new houses built or building at each side; and at last, after what was beginning to seem to Parrish a very long drive, although his watch told him they had been little more than half an hour on the way, a right-angle turn into an intersecting highway which a street-corner sign told him was Willowbrook Avenue.

It was the kind of street Alice's descriptions had led him to expect: flanked by modest modern houses. One or two of the largest might, he thought, have cost as much as eighteen or twenty thousand dollars, while the least of them must have cost twelve thousand. The shrubs and trees in the yards were young, and on such houses as were embellished with vines, the loftiest shoots did not reach more than halfway to the eaves, though there could be no doubt that, like the owners of the houses, they were year by year progressing upward in the world. Inexpensive cars stood

at the curb, here and there, along the street, and the lines of land proprietorship were marked off by little drives made of twin strips of cement, leading back to small garages.

In many front yards children were at play with their sleds, laughing and shouting as they made the most of the thin coat of snow, and from the sizes of the children Parrish gathered an impression that the fathers and mothers of this neighbourhood were young.

The house before which the taxi stopped was of stucco and brown-stained timber, low and substantial, somewhat in the style of a California bungalow, although there were upper windows, indicating a second story tucked away beneath the long slope of the roof.

A small boy and girl in the front yard stopped playing and advanced a few steps to inspect Parrish as he alighted from the taxi. Passing up the walk he smiled at them, but their big blue eyes remained solemn.

"How do you do, Georgie? How do you do, Alice?" he said, with a mischievous desire to astonish them.

They did not reply, but continued to follow him with their eyes. The only sign of their having heard him was given by little Alice, who quickly reached up and placed her small red-mittened hand in her brother's.

Parrish ascended the steps, crossed the wide porch

and rang the bell. Then, turning, he looked back at the little pair. They were still staring at him, but now Georgie, taking courage from the safe distance intervening between him and the strange gentleman, became vocal.

Nodding his head emphatically, as if in affirmation of a fact almost unbelievable, he declared: "I got a puppy. Name's Don. He can lick my face."

And before Parrish could make a suitable comment the high baby voice of the little girl chimed a corroborative echo: "He can lick his face." Like her brother she nodded as she spoke, widening her eyes, gravely bright.

"Is his tongue rough?" Parrish asked.

"Yes, it's rough," said George. And "It's wuff," immediately echoed Alice.

The conversation was interrupted at this juncture when a maid opened the front door.

Parrish asked for Alice and gave the maid his card, which, having no card tray, she took in her hand.

"Come in," she said civilly, opening the door wider after having looked at the card as if to see that he was not a canvasser. As he hung his coat and hat on the dark oak rack in the hall he saw her, on the way upstairs, inspecting the card again.

In the parlour he sat down in a morris chair by a wide front window, and from here he could see the children at play out in the yard. They were sweet-looking children, as Alice had said. He felt grateful

to them, because somehow—he did not quite know how—they had made easier his approach to the house.

The room was of good size with dark woodwork and patternless gray-green wall paper. The furniture was in the mission style, of oak—fumed oak he believed it was called—and the cushions in the chairs were of brown leather. The best thing in the room was the spacious Khiva rug, and the only other rug was a black bearskin, with a mounted head, lying before the fireplace. Between the front windows, near the chair in which he sat, stood a massive table with a cover of soft leather, dyed to a maroon colour, and on this was placed a lamp having a verdigris metal base and a translucent shade of glass, streaked green and white. Neatly arranged upon the table within reach of the morris chair were many popular magazines and several current novels. Against one wall was an ebonized upright piano with a book of songs for little children on the music rack, and beside the piano stood a tall wrought-iron lamp with a shade of wine-colour silk. Aside from two harmless landscapes in watercolour there hung upon the walls an etching of Rheims Cathedral, a sepia print of one of Rossetti's slender women, and at either side of the hall door a figure, reproduced in black and white, from Abbey's mural decorations in the Boston Public Library—the cowed Isaiah, and Sir Galahad standing in armour beside his horse.

He had ample time in which to observe these de-

tails, since the maid was gone for a long time. Outside, the daylight was beginning to fade, and the parlour, its windows shaded by the porch, was becoming shadowy. Overhead he could hear someone moving about. He wondered if it was Alice getting ready to come down.

Presently he heard a step on the stairs. But it was not Alice; it was the maid again.

"Miss Meldrum asks to be excused," she announced.

"She—she does?" He stood nonplussed.

"She's not very well to-day."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "Please tell her I'll come back this evening to find out how she is. You might just let her know I'm at the Statler."

Putting on his overcoat he wondered who it was he had heard moving about the room overhead. Of course it might have been the maid.

His spirits were at zero as he took his hat from the rack. He did not wish to leave the house; it was the one place in Cleveland where he wished to be, but he could think of no excuse for staying. Could it be possible that she would refuse to see him after he had come all the way out to Cleveland, sleeping in an upper berth and changing cars at Buffalo to get here in a hurry? Surely she could not be so hard on him as that! She was so sweet and gentle. On the other hand, though, he had known, down in Virginia, many an unreconstructed old lady, and some young ones, too, who were the embodiment of gentleness

until Yankees were mentioned, when they became more bitter than the most fiery of Confederate veterans. That under Alice's tenderness there might be an unrelenting strain was a possibility he had not until now faced. Oh, she must see him! She must!

As with great reluctance he opened the front door to leave the house, he found himself face to face with a stranger who was ascending the steps—a powerfully built man of about his own age, with ruddy cheeks and good-humoured blue eyes. Reaching the top step the man brought a key ring jingling from his pocket; then, as the door was already open, he put back his keys, and looking closely at Parrish, nodded pleasantly.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said in a strong voice, "you're Mr. Parrish, from New York."

"Yes—Mr. Brooks?"

"The same." His smile was engaging. "I had to reach around in my mind for a minute to think what your last name was. You're known as Dick in this house."

Parrish smiled back.

"I was having precisely the same difficulty with you," he said. "Of course Alice always speaks of you as George."

The master of the house came in and shut the door behind him.

"Take off your overcoat," he said.

"Thanks. I was just going."

"Where to?"

"Back to the hotel. I came to see Alice, but the maid tells me she isn't very well. Thought I'd try again this evening."

George had hung up his ulster.

"Yes," he said, "she's had a lot of headaches lately. That's why I came home early." Then, as Parrish had not moved to remove his overcoat, the other hospitably stripped the garment from his back, saying: "Here, you don't want to go yet. Come into my den—we'll have a smoke."

He led the way down the hall to a small room even more masculine in its equipment than the parlour.

Already Parrish was beginning to like this cordial Mid-Westerner with his big voice, his close-cropped, wiry, wavy hair, and his understanding eyes. Moreover, he was grateful to him for making it easy to remain.

"Hold on!" said George, stopping just inside the door, "that must be your taxi outside?" And when Parrish assented his host turned back declaring: "I'll send him away. When you have to go I'll drive you down."

"You're very kind," Parrish said, following him, "but let me send him away."

"Put your money back in your pocket!" ordered George as they raced together down the walk.

"No, I can't let you pay for my taxi."

"Yes, you can, too! Forget it! This is *my* town." He thrust money into the driver's hand and dismissed him, whereafter they returned to the house

and settled themselves with cigars in the lamplight of the den.

"When did you get in?" George asked.

"This afternoon. I was due about two-thirty, but my train was late."

"Ever been to Cleveland before?"

"Once or twice, on business, years ago."

"It's a good town," George assured him.

"I really don't know anything about it," Parrish answered. "I just went to a hotel and an office and a club."

"Been to the Athletic Club?"

"No, it was an old-fashioned club, very nice, right across the street from the hotel."

"Oh, the Union—I don't belong there. I'll be glad to give you a card to the Athletic if you'd care for it."

"That's very good of you."

After discussing the Athletic Club for a time George drifted to general talk about Cleveland: about how Cleveland grew, and why; the city's industries; the late Tom Johnson and the cult of the three-cent fare. Then, thinking of comparisons, he went on:

"I don't see how anybody can stand living in New York. Every time I go there it seems to me the place is worse. More people—more congestion, under the ground, and on it, and above it. I get the feeling that everybody hates everybody else. And so many foreigners—low-class Jews—parasites

—bolsheviks. Scum of creation piling in, producing nothing, ruining the city—maybe the whole country. Whew! That town makes me depressed about the future of these United States. When I'm there I have to keep reminding myself of Ohio and these other states out here, or I'd feel that everything was gone to pot."

"No doubt you're right," returned Parrish, "but you must remember that New York has a lot of attractions."

"Too many apartment houses," the other went on. "To live in a flat seems to me only a shade better than living in a hotel. I like to feel that I'm anchored to the soil. But I know what you mean, about attractions, and of course it's true. New York does offer a lot in the way of things that are improving and entertaining—museums, the theatres, concerts, and opera—if you care for opera."

"Yes, yes," said Parrish hurriedly.

"It seems to me," George continued, "that New York is essentially a battleground where men try their strength. Business competition must be terrible, and there are more temptations, more——"

"I'm delighted to hear that Mrs. Brooks is so much better," Parrish put in.

George beamed.

"She certainly gave us a scare," he answered, "but she'll be home pretty soon now—probably better than ever. It's a darn shame, her being sick. She didn't need to be, but she's one of those women

who hates to leave her family, and she wouldn't go until she had to. That's the way with the Meldrums—they don't care about a whole lot of people, but Lord, how they do tie up to the ones they're fond of!"

He seemed for a moment to reflect on this quality in the Meldrums; then, in a new tone, leisurely and expansive, he went on: "Well, I'm mighty glad to see you here, Parrish." He cocked his eye humorously. "I doped out that you'd be coming."

"I've been meaning to come for some time."

"I hope you'll stay till Margaret gets back. She and I are interested in you, you know—hearing so much about you. First thing Alice takes out of her bag when she gets here is your picture, and it's the last thing she packs before she leaves." And he added, with his infectious chuckle, which sounded as if a bag of marbles were being rattled in his chest: "If you're as much of a man as she claims you are, you're quite some person."

"I'm afraid I'm not, though," Parrish answered gravely.

George chuckled again.

"Of course you're not! If you were as good as Alice claims you are, then you'd be as good as Margaret claims I am, and there isn't anybody that good." He shook his head ruminatively. "They're a great pair, those girls! Alice—she's a sketch! I don't know what I'd have done without her while Margaret was away—I don't mean only running this plant for me and taking care of the children—I mean

the way she's worked to cheer me up—and the way she's amused me unconsciously, too." He laughed reminiscently. "Friend of mine—perhaps you've heard of him—J. N. Burlingham, president of the Cuyahoga Car and Foundry Company?"

"I know of that company," said Parrish.

"Well," George went on, chuckling, "Burlingham has taken a great fancy to me, just lately, since Alice came. He doesn't come around my office very much, but he can't keep away from me evenings. For about a week Alice thought he really did come here to see me. Almost any other girl would have caught on sooner, but that's one of the dandy things about her—she doesn't seem to realize that anybody could be interested in her. When she did get wise to it I had a deuce of a time getting her downstairs at all. And, Lord, how she did hang icicles on the poor cuss! She doesn't want to be mean to him—in fact, she likes him—but he's not going to get a chance to propose to her if she can help it."

And he went on: "I don't think it pays a woman to be too honest and straightforward. She does herself out of a lot of fun. That kind of woman treats men too well because she thinks they're as sensitive as she is. But you and I know that's not so. If we fall in love with a woman and she won't have us it may be a hard bump, but we get over it. We have our business to keep our minds occupied. But if a man should trifle with a woman like Alice I don't believe she'd ever get over it, do you?"

As he talked he had been watching the smoke of his cigar, but now, with the question, he turned.

Parrish reached slowly out and knocked the ash from his own cigar into a bowl.

"Perhaps not," he said.

There was silence between them for a time.

"Of course it has often struck you, as it has me," George said presently, "that in any relation between two people one of them always has the upper hand." And as Parrish nodded he continued: "Even in so-called equal partnerships one of the partners is always the stronger. In business one partner will dominate because he is more of a person than the other, but in domestic partnerships the man will generally dominate even when the woman is more of a person. It isn't only that he controls the purse-strings but that his position is stronger because he is freer, has more outside interests and is less sensitive. That has always seemed to me a rank injustice. What I mean is that men, instead of getting the upper hand of women because they deserve it, seem lots of times to get it for exactly the opposite reason—because they're so much more selfish than their wives. Or if the wife happens to be the more selfish one—of course that sometimes happens, too—then she gets the upper hand. It puts a premium on selfishness.

"I suppose," he pursued reflectively, "there is no better gauge of a man's quality than whether or not he imposes on a woman because of his advantage over her. It's pretty hard not to do it sometimes.

Take the case of man with a wife like mine. I try to be on my guard against imposing on Margaret, but I guess I do impose on her most all the time. There's our parlour out there, for instance." He gave his little laugh. "When we moved in here she bought that furniture because she knew it was the kind of stuff I liked. Alice says it's not in good taste, but Margaret sticks up for it because it's my style. It isn't what she'd have for herself at all, though. I didn't realize that in the beginning, but I've got wise to it since, and I'm going to remedy the matter when business picks up a little more. That's one of the things I've thought about while she's been away." And after a little pause: "Their going away does give us men a chance to think some, doesn't it?"

"I imagine so," Parrish answered, feeling as he spoke the inadequacy of the reply.

He liked George. George was being extraordinarily friendly. He had a feeling that George was trying to make him understand that he wished to help him, and he knew that he needed help, yet here he had sat as uncommunicative as a Buddha.

"Look here, Brooks," he said, leaning forward, "you've been bully to me and I appreciate it. The fact is, I'm afraid Alice is thinking of refusing to see me at all."

"I gathered that there had been a misunderstanding of some kind," returned George, "though she hasn't said a word. She's been awfully downhearted—didn't want me to know, but I could tell—and

last night, when you telephoned, I got out of the room in a hurry, but of course I couldn't help knowing she was crying. I don't mind telling you I was pretty sore on you last night."

"And I don't mind telling you," Parrish answered, "that I'm pretty sore on myself. Do you think perhaps you could get her to come down and see me, just for a minute?"

"Well, I got her down to see Burlingham," said George quizzically.

"I'm afraid that was easy compared with what this is going to be. The plain truth is, I don't deserve to see her."

George dropped the end of his cigar in the ash bowl and rose.

"I suppose not," he said.

"Of course," said Parrish, "if she's really sick I don't want to bother her. I'll come back."

"Oh, she can see you all right—if she wants to." He moved toward the door. "I'll go up and——"

"Wait!" cried Parrish; and as George turned: "My God! Tell her I've *got* to see her!"

"I'll do the best I can, old man." He moved on again.

But as he was starting up the stairs Parrish, following, caught him by the arm.

"Tell her," he said in an eager voice, "that it isn't going to do her a bit of good to say she won't see me—because I'm going to stick around here until she does!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE den was not a room suited to the needs of one nervously waiting. Small, with bulky furniture, it afforded but scant space for promenading; the only straightaway was the passage between fireplace and desk, and even that was abridged at one end by an armchair, so that four long steps covered the entire distance. For a time Parrish paced back and forth over the cramped course, smoking a cigarette which he had lighted after discarding his cigar; then, annoyed by the restrictive walls and furniture, he dropped again into a chair, and finding his cigarette burning to a stub, lighted a fresh one. When his second cigarette was consumed he flung it in the bowl and, opening his case to get another, found it empty. He looked about the room for cigarettes or cigars, but could discover only pipes and pipe tobacco.

Strange she did not come. He had hoped that George would be able to persuade her to come down at once. He wished he had noticed what time it was when George left him, and that the latter would return, if only for a minute, and give him some idea how things were going on up there.

For lack of other occupation he wandered about

inspecting the contents of the room. In three group photographs of football teams of the Ohio State University he had no difficulty in recognizing George, and he gathered from inscriptions on several silver cups standing on top of the bookcase that his host had also shone at shot putting and trap shooting. The books upon the shelves below dealt with hunting, fishing, and natural history, and the magazines upon the desk were sporting periodicals.

What could be the matter up there? He went to the door and listened, but the house was as silent as if it had been uninhabited. Perhaps Alice had been lying down; perhaps she was dressing. In that case, though, George could easily have come and told him what was causing the delay. Surely he would have done that. A nice fellow like George wouldn't leave him down here in this horrible suspense if he could help it. He must be staying because he had to stay. He must be having a hard time with her. Suppose she wouldn't come? Or if she did, what chance had he of obtaining her forgiveness when so persuasive a person as her brother-in-law had such difficulty in inducing her merely to come and listen to his plea? He took out his handkerchief and wiped the palms of his hands.

Oh, for a cigarette! George must have cigarettes. Again he looked for them, this time going so far as to search desk drawers, but to no purpose.

He had resumed his animal-like pacing and was trying to concentrate his thoughts upon the formu-

lation of an effective appeal to Alice, when through the slightly opened door he heard from above the squeak of a hinge and the faint sound of steps. The tread was not George's. It was a woman's. She was coming down the stairs. Coming slowly. He could hear each muffled footfall on the carpet.

Now that the moment when he should see her, the moment he had waited for so anxiously, was imminent, a wave of fear swept over him. Had it been George coming to tell him that Alice would not see him, his suffering would have been acute, but hardly more acute than was this panic at the thought of facing her. He dreaded to meet her eyes.

By the difference in sound he knew when she stepped from the last stair to the floor. Now she was in the hall, coming directly toward him. He stood a little back from the door, waiting, gazing at the place where she would appear.

The door swung slowly. As their eyes met he saw in hers the look that he had feared. It was a look that he had never seen before—how, then, had he known what it would be? There was no question, now, of what she knew. She knew! He understood it instantly and as definitely as if she had spoken out and told him.

With her hand on the knob she paused. He was struck by the fact that she looked taller, and for an instant that thought stood forward in his harassed mind. How curious that she should look so much taller!

He waited for a moment, hoping she would say



something that would help him to begin. Perhaps if he could once get started it would not be so hard. The things he wanted to say to her seemed to be revolving in his mind at terrible speed, like a huge fly-wheel in a power house. He must seize hold of that dizzying wheel. When he spoke it was if he had leaped blindly at it.

"Why you look taller!" he said, and wondered why he had begun with such a fatuity.

She stood motionless, silent, her hand upon the door knob as if at any moment she might turn and go. Was it perhaps the lines of her soft dark dress that made her look so tall?

"Please come in and sit down," he pleaded; and as still she did not move he repeated, "Please!—come in and sit down."

She closed the door and advancing seated herself in the nearest chair; and there was something in the way she sat that gave him a feeling of her impermanence there.

"Alice, won't you forgive me?"

"You broke your word," she answered without inflection.

"My word?" He was not sure to what she was referring.

"You promised you'd tell me if you ever—— Clara said you wouldn't, but I believed you."

Now he caught her meaning. The promise had meant so little to him that it had slipped his mind. Another black mark against him.

"If that were all I had to ask you to forgive!" he brought out in a low voice. "How am I ever going to explain? I can't explain it to myself. I feel as if I had been out of my mind. That's the only shred of defense I have to offer—and it isn't a defense. There's no justification for any of it, from beginning to end. You couldn't hate me more than I hate myself. I loathe myself! I'm wretched. I'm sick. I never deserved you, and now I deserve you less—but I never wanted you so much. I used to imagine I appreciated you, but—why, I didn't at all! Not at all. If I had, you and I would have been married long ago. But I had selfish delusions about the advantages of being free—just as now I have a selfish desire not to be free. Oh, Alice, if——"

"I used to wish you wanted to marry me," she said, still in that uninflected tone. "Now I thank God you didn't want to. If we had been married this would have happened just the same."

"Oh—no!" he cried.

"Yes, it would. If I had been your wife you would have been sly about it—you wouldn't have told me—you'd have got me out of the way just exactly as you did. But I didn't come down to discuss this with you. I came because George said you wouldn't go away until you saw me. Well, you've seen me—so now you can go."

"Go?" he repeated. "With you hating me like this? I can't—I've got to try to make you understand something. I've had an aberration—

but it's over with. The thought of it is sickening to me! Even if I never win you back I'm going to try to live it down because I must win back my own self-respect."

"Yes," she said.

He clutched at the small encouragement afforded by that single word.


"When I've won back my self-respect," he went on, "is there no chance of my winning back your respect, too?" And before she could speak he continued: "Don't answer now. Don't take that hope away from me—I couldn't stand it! I'm not asking you to promise anything; I'm only begging you not to efface me. I'm not asking you to marry me—because I don't dare. But won't you put me on probation? Won't you let me try all the rest of my life to make myself worthy of you? Don't answer that, either. I know how you feel now. Right now it doesn't seem possible that either of us can ever get over this; but if we can be patient, some day the wound will heal, leaving perhaps only a slight scar. That's the way the world is; if it weren't so life would be unendurable. Probably you will resent the idea—but I must tell you: I am actually a better man to-day because this thing has happened to me. It has humbled me, and I needed that. And it's given me a new sense of values. It has marked me away down and you away up. It has shown me the absolute falseness of the standards I used to believe in. Sophistication! Lord, what rot most

sophistication is! It took something like this to make me see straight. But I do see straight now. I'm really changed. Changed inside. Oh, I wish you could see how it has changed me!" And in this moment of unhappiness he was so earnest that he was theatrical—and beat upon his breast with a clenched hand.

"Don't I seem different to you, Alice? Don't you feel it? Don't you get something—I mean something like—well, like a man who used to come into our office—he was a hard drinker, and every now and then he would say 'I've gone on the water wagon,' and Bement and I would laugh because we knew it didn't signify anything at all—just temporary. Then one day we heard that his wife had left him. The next time we saw him he didn't say he was on the wagon—didn't even speak about drink until somebody offered him one; then he said, 'I don't drink any more,' and there was something about the way he said it that made us know that this time it was true."

He had been talking rapidly, but now he paused. Since entering the room Alice had looked at him steadily, and though she gave no sign of relenting, it seemed to him that the expression of her eyes grew less forbidding. It heartened him a little.

"And don't overlook this," he went on: "when his wife left him she thought she was through with him forever. But after a while she saw that he was really different and came back. They're happy now."



For the first time Alice lowered her eyes. Her hands had been clasped in her lap; now he saw that they were clenched, the knuckles showing white in the lamplight,

"I wish you'd go," she said, but her tone lacked something of the cold resolution it had formerly held.

He longed to touch her but was afraid. He felt that if he could take her hand the something he was powerless to express in words must flow into her, charging her with an understanding of this profound revolution in his soul. And because he feared to touch her physically he was impelled by instinct to try to touch her in another way, recalling to her the days when they were happy.

"I've been having a ghastly time lately, all alone," he said. "Night after night I've been sitting in my apartment longing for you, wishing I could go to you for comfort as I used to. Last evening when I was in the depths of despair, just before I telephoned, I got to thinking of the time when I had the grippe and how you came in every afternoon. You used to fix my pillows for me so much better than the nurse did. All day long I had you to look forward to, and I used to——"

"I wish you'd go!" she broke in, wringing her hands.

"But I don't want to leave you, dear! Where is there for me to go?"

She stiffened in her chair and raising her eyes looked at him savagely. It was as if some memory,

all but dismissed, had returned stealthily and stabbed her.


"Don't ask me where to go!" she cried with cold fury. "So far as I'm concerned you can go anywhere!" And as he stood astounded at such an outburst from her, she continued: "Why don't you go back to Atlantic City! Back to Rita Coventry! Back to—to where——"

She stopped, gasping as if suffocated, and there was a moment in which he felt himself actually quailing before her. Then quickly she turned away from him, sank her face in her arm on the back of the chair and wept.

Her weeping frightened him. He had never heard such tearing sobs. He dropped to his knees beside her, flung an arm about her, and drawing her to him, pressed his cheek against hers.

"Oh, don't! Alice! Don't! For God's sake, don't cry like that! Don't! I can't bear it! Oh, please don't!" He was pleading passionately without knowing what he was saying.

But the awful tearing sobs continued. With his arm about her he felt the impact of each shock. Never had he so desired to comfort any one, and never had he been so powerless. He snatched out his handkerchief and with a trembling hand tried to dry her cheek, as if the stopping of her tears could stop her sorrow. He was desperate about it, like one endeavouring to stanch a wound. Her sleeve was wet. He pressed the handkerchief into her hand.



"Oh, Alice! Dearest! Dearest! I feel like a murderer! Don't cry like that! Oh, please don't! There's nobody else that matters to me at all! Alice! I'll go—I'll do anything—if you'll only stop! Please, sweetheart! Oh, please!"

Again he put his cheek to hers, tightening his arm around her to fortify her body against the successive, racking impulses; and when at last she became quieter he knelt there, thankful, almost happy, holding her, pressing her face to his, stroking her hair, her shoulder, her arm, as if to smooth away the pain.

She relaxed against him with a sigh.

"Dearest!" he whispered.

She gave up.

"It's no use," she breathed despairingly. "I love you. I can't help myself."

"Thank God!" he murmured. "You love me. That means I've only got to make you glad you love me!"

As he knelt there with his arm around her and his face pressed to hers there came to him a memory at first seemingly unrelated—the memory of the time when he had almost drowned.

It was in Maine in the early fall. He had arrived from New York just before twilight and had hastened to the deserted bathing beach. Off shore a sloop was anchored and he made it his objective, swimming rapidly through icy water. While he had some distance yet to go he became conscious of fatigue, but

the space between him and the boat was now shorter than between him and the beach, so he kept on. The last few strokes brought him to the verge of exhaustion; he clutched at the boat's side, missed it, went down. Coming up he had to swim a stroke or two to reach it again. He put all his remaining strength into the effort, feeling that should his grasp fail this time he was lost; but now he managed to get his finger tips over the low wooden rail at the edge of the flush deck. For a long time he hung there in the frigid water, without strength to lift himself aboard, facing the fear that he could never do so. But at last, a little rested, he mustered the remnants of his energy and managed to clamber up the side to safety. Never would he forget the feeling of relief that came to him at the moment when he lifted himself gasping to the deck. Until now he had known no emotion like it.

In the moments following that jeopardy, when he lay in the lee of the little deckhouse recovering his strength, life had seemed sweeter to him than ever before, and he had something like a vision of the coming years spread out like a lovely landscape for him to wander in. And now, confident that Alice was to be restored to him, profoundly determined to make himself more nearly worthy of her, love seemed sweeter than ever before, and his landscape vision of the coming years was made beautiful by the thought of Alice with him.

In the past he had experienced many pleasures,

vivid but short-lived—selfish pleasures, glittering little pleasures, ornaments pinned on to life; but about this new-found happiness there was a reaching out, a sweep, which seemed to make it integral with life; and the thought struck him that this quality of largeness was in some way connected with the fact that now he was not thinking of himself but of Alice—of making Alice happy.

The three harmonizing notes of a Chinese gong echoed through the house. Alice stirred.

"Dinner," said she. "I ought to have put the children to bed long ago." She sat up, turning her face from him.

"It won't hurt them to stay up a little bit later this once, will it?" he asked as he rose.

"Anyway, I must go see. You'll keep George company at supper? It won't be much—the maid goes out to-night—but he'll be glad to have you."

"And you?"

"I can't come down—the way I look."

"But you must eat. I'll carry a tray to you."

He followed her to the foot of the stairs. He wished to stand there gazing after her as she ascended, but knowing that she preferred not to be looked at, turned to the parlour, where presently George joined him.

He tried to express his gratitude.

"Oh, that's all right," said George, checking his stumbling speech of thanks. "Come on in and have something to eat." He led the way to the

dining room. "I guess by the looks of you a drink wouldn't hurt you, either."

"Thanks," said Parrish, "but first I want to carry some supper up to Alice."

"Oh, I'll do that," the other said.

"Not if I can help it, you won't!" Parrish answered, mustering a smile. "It's the only thing I can think of to do for her right now."

Together they prepared the tray.

"No, we've got this wrong," said Parrish when the tray was set. "We ought to have put a napkin on first. We must make it look dainty."

"All right," George agreed tolerantly. "Here's a napkin. You go ahead and make it look dainty while I get you that drink."

The tray having been made ready before George returned, Parrish carried it upstairs, but at the top of the flight, not knowing which was Alice's room, he hesitated. He called her and was guided by her answering voice to the door.

"Come in," she said, and as he entered the dimly lighted chamber she warned, "Look out for that chair."

He looked for a place to set the tray, and finding a small table appropriated it for his purpose, carrying it over to the couch where she was lying.

As she sat up to inspect her supper he suggested: "Wouldn't you like a little more light?"

"I suppose I'll need it. That one over by the dresser, please."

Turning on the light he saw his photograph, and hoped that it had remained there ever since she came to Cleveland.

"Pictures like this are too big to lug about," he commented. "I must have a miniature of you to carry with me when I travel." Then returning to her side, eager for approbation of his handiwork, he asked: "Well, how do you think the tray looks?"

"Very nice."

"You might just make sure you've got everything you want," he suggested. "George and I tried to think of everything but—oh, I forgot the salt, didn't I!"

"I won't need it," she protested.

But already he was leaving the room.

Returning with the salt he placed it on the tray and manœuvring to the foot of the couch sat down.

"I hope you feel a little better?"

She nodded.

"That's good!"

After a little silence, during which she drank some tea, she said: "Now you'd better go down to George—and have your own supper."

Reluctantly he rose.

"You're sure there isn't anything more I can bring you?"

"No, thanks; I have everything I want."

He longed to embrace her.

"Oh, my dear," he began, "how I wish——"

But he was interrupted by George's voice booming

from below: "Hey, you, Dick! How long does it take you to carry a saltcellar upstairs? Come on to supper!"

"Right down!" he called back, but he did not move from her side.

"May I come up and see you afterward?"

"I'm sorry—I'm afraid I'm too tired."

"Yes, of course," he said quickly, his voice full of solicitude. "May I see you to-morrow?"

She nodded, asking: "But when are you going back to New York?"

"Oh, I haven't thought about that. I'll have to go pretty soon—in a day or so—but I must wait until you're better. You'll be a lot better to-morrow, won't you?"

"No doubt," she answered. "Now you really must run along."

"Yes." He looked at her hungrily.

Passing by the back of the couch on his way to the door he ventured to bend and kiss her hair.

As he reached the hall she stopped him.

"Dick."

"Yes, dear?"

"This lake climate is so changeable—did you bring warm clothing?"

CHAPTER XXVII

BEFORE Parrish left for New York he had a long talk with Alice. He begged her to marry him as soon as possible, and although she would give him no assurance, he took with him on his journey three thoughts to comfort him: She had assented to his coming back to Cleveland a week hence. George, a matrimonial enthusiast because of his own happy experience, was his supporter, and this, he felt, meant that he would have the support of Margaret also. And most encouraging of all, Alice was worrying about his health again, God bless her!

That she would marry him he now believed. His fear was that she would make him wait. What if she kept him waiting six months—or a year! The mere thought of such delay appalled him. A terrible waste of precious time! And he wasn't growing any younger—that ought to be considered, too.

Among other arguments presented to Alice in his letter to her from the train, he made a point of his increasing years.


“In a couple of years or so,” he wrote, “I'll be forty—practically middle-aged. Youth is going. I

can feel myself aging. I can't stand this waiting. It's going to make an old man of me if you don't look out."

However, he overlooked the fact that in this argument he was exhibiting a quality anything but old: his impatience was that of a young lover.

In the evening after his return to New York he telephoned to Alice, and finding conversation with her highly satisfactory called her up again next night, and the night after. Telephoning to her became a daily habit with him; the contact thus established made him less lonely; he knew what was going on out there day by day. For example, when little Georgie, looking out of the window at a storm, remarked that the rain was combing its hair, the *mot* reached Parrish on the evening of its utterance. Again, on the night of Margaret's return, he was introduced to her over the wire. Her voice was sweet, like Alice's. And again on one occasion when, Alice being out, he talked with George, he was in position to gather such satisfaction as a lover might from an exact knowledge of her whereabouts: She had gone with the president of the Cuyahoga Car and Foundry Company to see John Barrymore.

Parrish went to Cleveland the next week-end. Upon the occasion of this visit he did not neglect to point out to Alice that, however she might have passed her evenings during the preceding week, he had invariably remained alone at home for the pur-



pose of telephoning to her. And he had almost finished reading Carlyle's "French Revolution." Later in the same evening he managed to give her his estimate of John Barrymore as an actor. In his opinion Barrymore was overrated.

To Margaret he was drawn at once. She was like Alice, though not so beautiful. Her face, however, held that same sweetness, and there was a poignant loveliness in her eyes when she looked at George and the children.

Among Margaret, George, and Parrish there was no concealment as to his aspirations; when Alice was absent they would discuss the topic frankly.

"She ought to marry," Margaret said. "She is a born wife and mother. I suppose being a bachelor you haven't noticed her tact and judgment with the children. Marriage will do a lot for her. It will give her more poise."

George, sitting on the arm of her chair, looked down at her affectionately.

"Yes, dear," he said.

And she glanced up at him and smiled and nodded.

"Margaret was just like her," George explained.

This aspect of the matter had not hitherto struck Parrish, but he realized instantly that what they said was true. The essential difference between Alice and her sister, aside from Alice's greater beauty, was that she had less poise. Margaret had the serenity which comes only to those who are conscious of fulfilling their destiny; one knew that she

felt secure, established; her husband, her children, her house, even the furniture in the house, seemed to collaborate to that end; it was as if the very chairs contributed their quota toward making her feel sure. Thinking of this, Parrish was struck by the fancy that the furniture in this house, although it had been selected to suit George, and although it was presumably his legal property, seemed to belong more to Margaret than Alice's own furniture to her. Why was it that an unmarried woman, however independent, never seemed so completely the proprietor of her home and possessions as a married woman?

Now he perceived clearly what hitherto he had but vaguely felt—that as a wife, secure in home and husband, Alice would have her proper background. In marriage she would bloom.

Suddenly it came to him what her background should be.

Blenkinswood!

Blenkinswood for her wedding present! Blenkinswood restored, with the old portraits, mahogany, and silver, back in their places. And a surprise! He would keep it secret from her until he should take her there.

The project put him in high spirits. He felt enterprising, confident. And when that evening after supper George and Margaret considerably went out to a movie, leaving him alone with Alice, he had a new sureness with her. To-night she must definitely promise to become his wife.

She did. She was quite reasonable about it. He

was able to make her see that the week of his probationary period, being in reality an æon, was long enough.

And ah, the beauty of her yielding!

It was the essence of her nature to yield to those she loved. He must be on his guard always against that. He must spoil her—because to spoil her was impossible. He must teach her to be selfish—because it was a lesson she could never learn. With all the spoiling he could give and all the selfishness he could instill, she would ever be contriving to give him his own way.

When at some future time it would seem to him that he had done his utmost he must keep on searching out new contributions to her happiness, heaping them up before her in atonement for the past. Owning her a debt that he could never liquidate, he must pay and pay against it, so long as his life should last.

A trinity existed in her. She was mother—sweet-heart—daughter to him. How he wished that he had known her when she was the age of little Alice!

With her cheek resting peacefully upon his shoulder he was for a long time motionless and silent. The lamplight, sifting through the outer softness of her hair, crowned her with a golden aureole, and this tender and pure luminousness about her head added to his awe.

Yet he was aware, in his feeling for her, of a duality. Bound up with his almost religious adoration for her as a beautiful spirit was a passion for her as a

beautiful woman. The two emotions were intertwined like two vines of equal strength, so wrapped around each other, so inextricably entangled from trunk to tendril, as to form a leafy cable, on which white blooms and red grew one against the other. Instead of strangling, these vines upheld and made each other doubly strong. And Parrish knew that this duality, this blending of adoration and passion, was essential to a great and lasting love.

He craved to tell her of these things, but could only whisper over and over, "I love you! Oh, I love you so!"

And as he murmured to her he felt a terrible, sweet suffering because instead of rearing for her a palace of his thoughts he was able to build her only a structure of old worn words.

Now they were lovers again! Yet not again, for this was a balanced relationship such as had not before existed. This love was new. There was a fullness, a translucence, an unthinkable glory in it which imparted to his spirit a rapturous sense of form and colour, arborescent, radiant. He was exalted. A pilgrim, footsore and weary, he had stumbled through the world and reached at last the holy place. With soul and body bathed he had entered the temple and knelt before the sacred shrine. In her love he was reborn.

It seemed to him that George and Margaret had hardly gone when they were back again, speaking of

having seen the entire evening's show. The speed of it all dazed him. He found it hard to speak with them coherently as they paused on their way upstairs.

"And when we are married," he said as he sat down again by Alice, "there's one thing I want you to let me do. I want you to let me plan the wedding trip. I want you to start out with me without knowing where you're going. Will you trust me to plan something that will please you?"

Though she assented readily enough he was particular to make the understanding very definite.

"Then it's agreed? You will abide by my plans?"

"Of course."

"All right," he said triumphantly. "I'll tell you the first part of the plan now. We are to be married about the middle of May. That gives us nearly two months to get ready."

She smiled, saying, "Oh, I didn't agree that you should set the time."

"But I've got to set the time if I'm to set the trip," he insisted. "I've got to make it seasonable, haven't I?"

Before he went back to New York that night he made her see the soundness of his argument. Again she was reasonable—so reasonable that he almost wished he had said April. But two months would give him none too much time in which to get Blenkinswood in order.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ONE evening a few weeks later, when Alice was in New York buying a trousseau and arranging to give up her apartment, she spoke to him of Blenkinswood.

"I've never been able to understand," she said, "why you don't take better care of it. That is one thing I am going to try to make you do."

It gave him great amusement to assume, in answering, the tone he had so often taken in the old days when he used to put her off.

"Oh, let's not bother about Blenkinswood now," he said as if the topic bored him.

And it was difficult for him not to laugh as he spoke, for they were in her apartment, and her words had interrupted his surreptitious scrutiny of her chintz curtains, which he intended to have duplicated for her room in the old house. Moreover, he knew that the transformation of Blenkinswood was now well under way. Not only had the shiftless farmer been dismissed, and a young couple, the husband a graduate of an agricultural school, been established in a cottage on the place, but a large force of carpenters, plumbers, and painters were at work in the house, installing a heating plant and bathrooms, lay-

ing hardwood floors and restoring the ancient paneling. Outside, a landscape gardener with a gang of men was engaged in renewing the lawns, gardens, and slave-built terraces sloping down to the river front; that very day Parrish had received from the gardener a report informing him that, despite neglect, the hedges and arbour of box, planted on the terraces by the Signer, could be reclaimed.

The boat-landing at the foot of the garden was being rebuilt, for a hurried trip to Blenkinswood had reminded Parrish that Virginia was still backward as to roads, and he not only wished to avoid the rough eleven-mile drive from the railway but desired that Alice's first vision of her home should be from the river. He could imagine the expression of her face when, as their launch should come around the bend, she first saw the venerable mansion crowning the bluff, the sunlight glowing on its rosy bricks. Landing, they would mount the terrace steps, passing the giant azaleas, the wistaria, strolling under the arch of box, and so up and up until, ascending the last terrace, they reached the crest of the hill, where the house, with its two long wings extending like outstretched arms, would seem to welcome them.

There came a Sunday, the first day of May, two weeks before the date set for the wedding, when Parrish planned to pack the last of the smaller treasures to be shipped to Blenkinswood. Coming out to breakfast in his dressing gown he found the Sunday papers

piled on the table in the dining room. After pouring his coffee he slipped a news section from the sheaf, and leaning it against the coffeepot before him, found himself facing a picture of Rita and Delaney, beneath which, in large headlines, he read:

DIVA MARRIES COMPOSER SHE MADE FAMOUS
RITA COVENTRY BECOMES WIFE OF PATRICK DELANEY, SEVERAL
YEARS HER JUNIOR

SINGER'S ASSERTION SHE WOULD NEVER WED
RECALLED

Stated at Time of Reported Engagement to Italian Noble,
Domesticity Impossible for Artists and Marriage Certain to be
Failure. "A Woman's Right to Change Her Mind," She Says.

With an interest keen but quite impersonal he read the florid story. For him it had no more significance than if it had been the tale of some happening in a city he had visited long ago. Rita seemed strangely remote. A reporter had interviewed her and she had spoken with a brazenness which Parrish found repellent.

"Yes," she was quoted as saying, "it is true that when, several years ago, I refused the Duca del Valentino, I did so on the ground that an opera singer should not marry. But though a singer, I am also a woman, and a woman has a right to change her mind.

"Paddy"—here the reporter described her arch look at her young husband—"is enormously gifted

and I intend to see that he gets the fullest opportunity for self-expression. He has never been abroad, and you may imagine with what pleasure I anticipate acting as his guide in my beloved France, for which we sail May twentieth. Some of my friends tell me I am a fool to marry and especially to marry a man younger than myself. That may be true. I can only say that now we are blissfully happy. What if later we tire of each other? Shall we not have had our hour of joy? After a motor trip through France we shall settle quietly for the summer at Deauville, where I have taken a villa. I intend to show him how domestic I can be. I shall cook for him, sew on his buttons, and mend his socks, like any good wife."

Sitting there alone Parrish burst out laughing. He could fancy Rita cooking for Delaney—once—carefully costumed for the part. And the simple life at Deauville, that Mecca of jaded Parisians, with its casino and its one-piece bathing suits! Poor Delaney, how out of the picture he would be! He was so boyish, so ingenuous. There was something really fine about him, too. Would that fineness be burned out? He felt genuinely sorry for Rita Coventry's young husband.

Breakfast over he took the Sunday papers to the living room. The floor and walls were bare, and packing boxes stood where the furniture had been. Some of the things were going to Blenkinswood, some to the larger apartment he had taken in New York.

To-day he would not have time to read the papers. He used them to wrap up the silver, Ito helping him.

Then he turned to the bookcase, where were the portfolios containing the old documents and the engravings of the house. The papers must be neatly arranged for shipment. Opening the first portfolio he made himself look at the engraving showing Blenkinswood "with its new wing, added in 1791." In the centre of the picture was the ruinous imprint of a sharp little French heel. Once he had thought the damage irreparable, but now he remembered a man down on Fourth Avenue, very skillful, who could repair such things. He would send him the engraving and the torn letter of the Signer. When they had been mended the scars would be almost imperceptible.

CHAPTER XXIX

AND you honestly have no idea where this ship is going to take us?" he asked Alice. "Not the least in the world," said she. "I don't even know the ship's name."

"Would you like to know it?" he asked, delighted at her ignorance.

"No, I don't care."

"Do you think you're going to Florida—or Panama—or South America—or Bermuda—or Europe? Where do you think you're going?"

"I don't know at all." She laughed. "Wouldn't it be absurd if they came and asked me where I was going—and I couldn't tell them!"

"Tell them," he said, pouring over her an adoring look, "to ask your husband!"

"I know who he is, anyway!" she said, and after a quick look about reached out and pressed his hand.

"And," he said proudly, "you know what your name is, don't you, Mrs. Parrish?"

She nodded.

"Perhaps that's why I'm not interested in the name of the boat."

A steward carrying a long cardboard box knocked at their cabin door near by. Parrish crossed the

deck, took the box, and entering the cabin, opened it. It contained Ophelia roses—her favourites—with petals shading from cream to a delicate pink. He took them out, assembled them and placed them in her arms. She buried her face in the blooms, and as she raised it there came a little flush of pleasure in her cheeks; it was as if the colour of the roses had been transferred to them.

Little things always pleased her so!

She rang for a stewardess, who brought a vase; but the stewardess was not allowed to arrange the flowers; Alice must do that herself, although the vessel was now backing out into the stream, and Parrish, in the doorway, was urging her to join him on deck. But before they were fairly headed down the river she was out there with him, watching the cross currents of shipping and gazing at the massed, competing towers of lower Manhattan, etherealized in a haze of smoke and bathed in the soft light of a late afternoon sun which shone upon them like a rose-coloured calcium in the theatre.

As they gathered way, passing down the harbour, the fresh salt smell became more vigorous and the breeze more lively. But though that boisterous wind whirled skirts and snapped the sheltering canvas at the forepart of the deck, there was a mildness in it. It was a breeze of spring—not the false spring of a few months since, but the true season of resurrection and rebirth.

When the vessel entered the Narrows they as-

cended to the deserted boat deck, and standing by the towering stack, watched the black smoke stream back across the water. It was twilight. In the sky behind them orange streaks still showed, while with the gray of the distant shores was blended a subtle note of mauve. To the north and to the south the evening sky was clear, but the horizon to the east was black and menacing.

A great liner, which must have started some time after they did, had followed down the bay and all but overtaken them. As they emerged from the Narrows she was entering behind them; through the Lower Bay and the Swash Channel she pursued them closely; and no sooner had their bows made contact with the open ocean beyond Sandy Hook, giving the other sea room, than she came up and passed them arrogantly, close inboard, her sleek black body dotted with long rows of porthole lights. The stream of sable smoke hurled by her four red stacks, soot banded at the top, was like a stream of curses poured at the humble coastwise vessel which had retarded her, and the picture of impatience was heightened by the nervous, syncopated flashing of a signal light above the bridge. She was telegraphing with it, talking furiously. Furiously, too, her four propellers lashed the waves behind.

Parrish recognized that proud sea challenger. He had crossed on her. Moreover, he knew from his morning paper that she was sailing to-day. And he knew more than that, for the list of prominent pas-

sengers that he had read was headed by the name of Rita Coventry.

"What a beauty!" exclaimed Alice, gazing across the water at the other vessel.

He assented, mentioning the liner's name.

"But we aren't going the same way they are," she commented, observing that their own course had been swinging toward the south. And she added, "I'm glad. I don't think that sky out there looks any too pleasant."

He glanced at the dark line of horizon to the eastward. Then, with a feeling of complete finality, he turned his back upon the other ship, and facing the bows of their own vessel, now straightened on a southern course, gazed at the calm sea and the peaceful heavens.

"Well, dear," he said, "we needn't worry about what's out there, where they are going." And he added, "We couldn't ask a sweeter sky than is ahead of us."

Then, as the wash from the fleeing liner reached them, causing the deck to lurch a little, he encircled Alice with his arm, steadying her.

THE END



1. The first part of the document is a list of names and their corresponding addresses. The names are listed in a column on the left, and the addresses are listed in a column on the right. The names are: John Doe, Jane Smith, and Bob Johnson. The addresses are: 123 Main St, 456 Elm St, and 789 Oak St.





